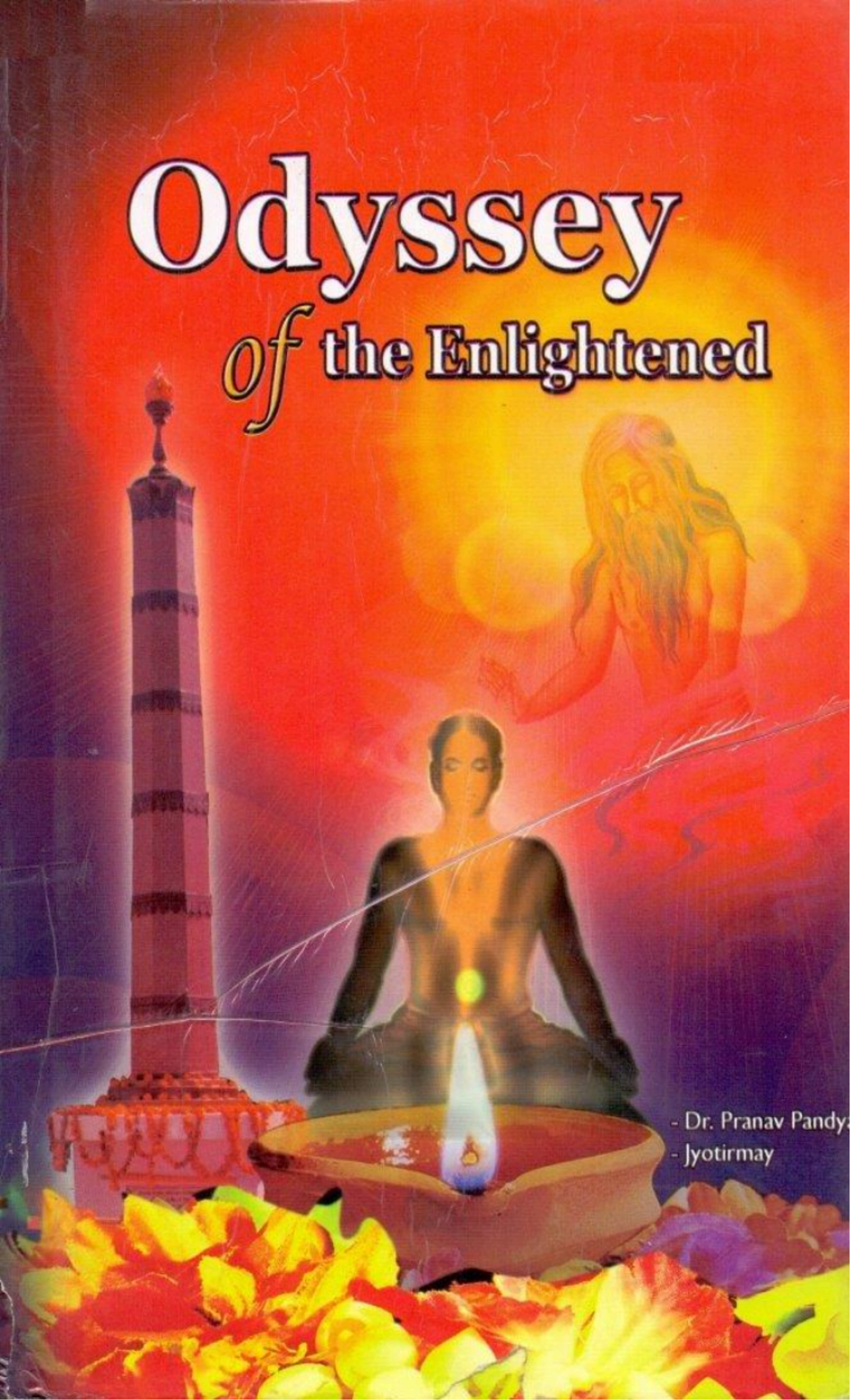

Odyssey

of the Enlightened

- Dr. Pranav Pandy
- Jyotirmay

Odyssey of The Enlightened

Volume - 1

English version of an engrossing and enchanting presentation,
titled ***Chetana ki Shikhar Yatra*** (in Hindi),
of the life, work and mission of a sage, a visionary, a reformer,
and a pioneer of spiritual renaissance,
Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya

Dr. Pranav Pandya

&

Jyotirmay

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Prologue

On the *Ramnavami* day of *Samvat* 2040 (April 10, 1984), Gurudev (Pandit Sriram Sharma, Acharya) went into complete seclusion. He stopped meeting people. The inspiring physical contact that the *Sadhaks* and *Karyakartas* (volunteers) were privileged to have with him till then was abruptly broken. All of us were completely benumbed by this unexpected decision. Till then he had been undertaking extensive tours in connection with the *Pran – Pratishtha Samarohs* (ceremony of consecration of idols) in *Shaktipeethas* (temples of Mother Gayatri) established in different parts of India. Suddenly, this 'seclusion' and 'silence'! What will happen next? The Teacher, under whose direct guidance we had been doing *'Sadhana'* of 'The Advent of Divinity in Mankind' and 'The Descent of Heaven on Earth', was denying us the heavenly joy of his physical proximity. How would we get his guidance? What would we do without his physical proximity? However this uncertainty did not last long; but for whatever time it was there it was really a terrifying experience. Our agony was deep because at that time he didn't disclose any reason for his withdrawal into complete solitude.

Gurudev sent out a message, which was an assurance as well as a guidance. The message was that His gross body that appeared physically active till then would start becoming progressively subtle. There was no need to get worried or disappointed about this transformative process. Thousand times more effective work would be accomplished through the subtilized being than was being done through the gross body. This assurance was not from an ordinary person but from a venerated *Siddha Purush*(a spiritual master and adept), who had inspired and guided millions of people. In this series of books, where we are going to present a biographical sketch of his spiritual growth, he first appears as an ordinary human being who gradually evolves into an extraordinary spiritual aspirant and *Sadhak* and then a fully awakened soul.

Regarding *Sookshmikaran Sadhana* (penance for subtilization) he assured us that the impossible looking uphill task of transformation of the era would become possible by this *Sadhana. Sadhaks* also heard that five *Virbhadras,* akin to five representative *Ganas* of Lord Shiva, would be made manifest through this *sadhana*. According to mythological descriptions, *Virbhadras* are five manifestations of Lord Shiva; who are endowed with all the divine attributes and powers of Lord Shiva himself. The manifestation of *Virbhadras* through *Sookshmikaran Sadhana* that Gurudev talked about was to be accomplished at the level of consciousness. There was another aspect of *Sookshmikaran* through which Gurudev would manifest himself in the minds and souls of *Sadhaks,* as a consequence of which ordinary looking *Sadhaks* and *Karyakartas* would be endowed with extraordinary capabilities to be able to fulfill the mission of epoch transformation.

This assurance was directly given through written and spoken words of Gurudev. In order to bridge the gulf between two extreme situations of his (i) easy direct access and (ii) sudden withdrawal into seclusion, for a short time he used audio-visual aids. His messages were sent to the *Parijans* through videocassettes to enable them to get plugged into their inner-selves. As their inner-selves became capable of receiving Gurudev's messages, there was no need for any external aids to get his guidance and living touch.

Direct contact was totally prohibited except for a few exceptions in between, when he would meet some *Sadhaks* for very specific reasons. Such occasions were rare indeed. Around that time, there came one highly advanced *Tantrik Sadhak* to Shantikunj. The purpose of his visit was to get initiated into *Deeksha* by Gurudev and he was waiting for his silence to break. This *Sadhak* had his own experience. During conversations he confided, "Gurudev is the visible manifestation of Shiva. What have you seen and felt so far? The real *Yogis* whom I have personally met also talk about him. I too have developed an inner vision and from that I can testify that such incarnate souls accomplish far less in the physical form, but after subtilization their capabilities for accomplishment of their mission are augmented manifold. At present, very few people know that the era is changing but after a few years you will see how forceful a divine energy current Gurudev is going to generate. Its effect will be visible once he casts off his physical sheath. Thousands of ordinary looking *Parijans* will be performing extraordinary deeds. These achievements will make the society and the nation strong and prosperous beyond our wildest imagination. Other advanced *Sadhaks* of various traditions also came to Shantikunj during that period. Their perceptions, too, were almost the same.

On Gayatri Jayanti day of *Samvat* 2047 (June 2, 1990), Gurudev withdrew from his physical sheath. One *Shakta-siddha* from South India, who came to pay obeisance to the mortal remains of Gurudev, said that this person (Gurudev) was the leading hero of the coming era. When asked how he said so, his reply was "Don't estimate his popularity by the gathering here. In the coming years, millions of people will study his thoughts/literature, appreciate the deeds done by him and try to imbibe his teachings in their lives." This prophecy of that *Sadhak* had already proved correct if we look into the expansion of the Mission between the years 1986 -1990. Perhaps he was not aware of the developments of the previous 5 – 6 years. He would have sensed the future possibilities only through his inner vision. But the *Parijans* of Gayatri Pariwar are witness to the happenings of those years.

Even during the physical presence of Gurudev, *Yug Sandhi Mahapurashcharan* initiated in 1988 inspired innumerable people to participate in *Yug Sadhana.* After he left his physical sheath, Vandaniya Mataji took charge of the activities of the Mission. The achievements of these afteryears provide enough evidence that Gurudev's assurance was effulgent like the rays of the Sun. Devotees were coming to Shantikunj from all parts of the country as well as from abroad - invited as well as uninvited. Within one year of his *Mahaprayan,* the successful organization of six Grand *Deepyagyas* in different parts of the country; *Shraddhanjali Samaroh* (ceremony for paying homage to Gurudev) and *Shapath Samaroh* (oath-taking ceremony) - both at Shantikunj; initiation of the chain of *Ashwamedha Yagyas* from 1992 onwards, and the mass gatherings in all such functions were ample evidence of the miraculous workings of the subtle power of Gurudev.

It appeared as if Gurudev was manifestly present in and guiding the activities of the *Parijans* of *Gayatri Pariwar, Shaktipeethas, Pragya Sansthans* and was inspiring the virtuous people to take active part in the Mission's activities. These are the concrete personal perceptions of the authors and innumerable *Parijans* like them.

It is difficult to determine the starting point of his great work. There are several incidents; for example, the open *Deeksha* of *Gayatri Mantra*, nursing of an untouchable woman in his village, protection of sick cows, undertaking *Mahapurashcharan Sadhana* at the tender age of 15, writing inspiring literature, beginning of the chain of *Yagyas*, establishment of Gayatri Pariwar, *Sahastra-kundiya Gayatri Mahayagyaya* in Mathura after the completion of *Mahapurashacharan Sadhana*, etc, each of which may be called the beginning. We believe that none of these is a starting point. Each of these is a part and parcel of the same incessant stream of 'time' that has been continuously flowing for the past two thousand five hundred years or even more. These are only the milestones of the same Immortal Journey.

From the point of view of literary output, the number of books written by Acharyasri crosses a three thousand mark. From January 1940 onwards he had been regularly writing one book per month in the form of Akhand Jyoti (magazine). The feat that first attracts attention of scholars is the popularization of ancient scriptures by him. Simple commentaries and translation in Hindi of all the four *Vedas*, eighteen *Puranas,* one hundred and eight *Upnishads,* twenty *Smritis,* twenty four *Gitas,* etc. and making them readily available to the masses – alone was a gigantic task that could establish him as a great scholar. But his aim was not to be acclaimed as a great scholar.

The establishment of Gayatri Pariwar has been the central thrust of his Herculean efforts towards defining *Sanatan Dharma* as a universally acceptable way of spiritual quest. People from all the paths of *Sadhana* like, *Shaiv, Shakt, Vaishnav*, etc. gathered together under this banner. A new chain of *Teerthas* was initiated with the establishment of Gayatri Tapobhoomi in Mathura. This sequence has not stopped; it is still continuing. Thousands of *Gayatri Mahayagyas* organized by Acharyasri throughout India may be visualized as *'Digvijay Yatra'*. In 1971, five *Sahasra-Kundiya Mahayagyas* conducted under his supervision could be considered as the declaration of victory of *Dharma,* at least, in those regions.

Imparting greater weightage to *Sadhana,* he made *Shantikunj* his centre of activities from 1971 onwards. *Sadhana* sessions at different levels were conducted here during the next twelve years. Thousands of *Sadhaks,* according to their inner preparation, received guidance from him in their spiritual *Sadhana*. There were several cases in which the *Sadhaks* could achieve the level of a *Siddha Purush*. These *Sadhaks* were strictly forbidden to display their *Siddhis* (supernatural powers).

Logic, facts and evidence are the prime touchstones of this age. Acharyasri used to say that religion and spirituality should prove themselves true on these touchstones. For this purpose, in 1979 he instituted "Brahmavarchas Shodh Sansthan" at Hardwar to investigate the veracity of spirituality through scientific means. The small seed sown in 1979 has now taken the shape of a banyan tree. Its activities have further expanded with the establishment of Dev Sanskriti Vishwa

Vidyalaya. This project is being visualized as the center for synthesis of the old and the new, East and the West and Science and Spirituality. Acharyasri made *Gayatri Mantra* as the foundation stone of his missionary work. He could visualize the seeds of Indian philosophy and spirituality in the syllables of *Gayatri Mantra*. These seeds sprouted and myriads of *Sadhana-* flowers started blossoming in the garden of *Sanatan Dharma*. Indeed, in the later years of life he started visualizing the need of a world religion on the basis of *Gayatri Mantra*. So be it.

It gives us immense pleasure to present the spiritual odyssey of Acharyasri. While presenting it we feel the soul-level bliss of remembering our Gurudev, our *Ishta*. In order to search the true facts about his life, we encountered many hurdles. But with Gurudev's grace we were able to sift facts from fiction and we can humbly affirm the authenticity of all the facts mentioned in this work.

The first problem in this attempt was that sufficient material was not available about Acharyasri. He also didn't tell much about himself. Whatever was disclosed was done purely from the point of view of its usefulness to *Sadhaks*. *Parijans* requested him several times for detailed account of his life, but he ignored such requests. On such occasions he would say 'whatever is visible, that is more important'. On repeated insistence of *Parijans* he wrote a book titled "My Life: Its Legacy and Message" This book contained very scanty details about the incidents of his life; it was his vision and philosophy of life that were more clearly elaborated. When the *Parijans* read that book, they again repeated their request. This request was more of a reproach about non-fulfillment of their expectation. Gurudev would answer that his 'vision' itself is his life.

Acharyasri didn't write his autobiography but some of the rare incidents/experiences used to become evident in personal talks or correspondence or writings. These incidents were compiled. Essential contexts were probed in the history of freedom struggle of India. We enquired from his contemporaries and relatives. We also interacted with the old volunteers of Gayatri Pariwar who had actively worked with him. Whatever material was made available through these exercises was properly analyzed and is being presented here. In this biography, some till now unknown incidents of his life have been mentioned. He forbade disclosing these incidents to the public till the year 2000. This injunction has been honored. Now the time has come to make them public. When the readers go through this book, they will themselves identify such incidents. While collecting and presenting this material, several times there was a warm feeling that Gurudev himself was making us write. Whatever is inspiring and soul- uplifting in this narration is due to the blessings of Gurudev. If there are any drawbacks in this presentation, they are ours and for that we seek pardon from Gurudev.

- Pranav Pandya
Jyotirmay

1

Thou Dispenser of India's Destiny

Twentieth century or the past hundred years had been the years of major upheavals and radical changes not only for Indian society but also the history of world. In the year 1905, the reaction that was witnessed in the entire country after the partition of Bengal and the way in which the nationalist sentiments were aroused in the years to follow, ultimately culminated in the freedom of India 42 years later. The incident of 'Bang - Bhang' (partition of Bengal) was only an instrument. In a broader perspective, however, it was not so significant that it could change the destiny of British Rule. Six years later in 1911, the division was revoked but that spark awakened the entire nation; and the thirst for freedom in the Indian public went on increasing. The division of Bengal stirred up the emotions of millions of children of Mother India. They got united and organized and after passing through many stages like protest against the Rowlett Act, the tragedy of Jalianwala Bagh, Non-cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience, Satyagrah, Boycott of Simon Commission, Quit – India

Movement, etc their endeavor resulted in the freedom of India on August 15, 1947

Did India really win Independence? The occult vision of Siddha Purushas, gifted with divine insight, sees something different. According to them, the freedom of India is a part of a larger Divine Plan. According to that Plan, the world has to enter a spiritual era. India is destined to play a crucial role in the ushering of the new era, because it has a unique message to deliver to the world. It is capable of giving a new direction to the destiny of the human race. If India's independence is a part of the Divine Plan, why did this country become slave at all? Answering this question Sri Aurobindo wrote at length in the April 1908 issues of 'Bande Mataram'. Its essence is as follows: "England's time is over in Hindustan. It is God's will that England should rule India for sometime. The entire world was surprised to see how easily British rulers captured the entire country. People thought that this was made possible due to extraordinary genius and power of British rulers. Indeed, England helped propagate this notion and got greatly benefited by it. But the truth is that England never won India. In general, those who worked for England were really trivial people, leaving aside a few exceptions. Without God's grace they would not have been able to make place in history or elsewhere. The defeat of India can neither be attributed to the genius or power of the winning side nor to the weakness of the dependent race. It is such a miracle of the history that cannot be explained. It may be said that it is such an example in which without any specific virtues, a great task was assigned to an agency; and an angel was supervising that the given task was completed in time."

"Once that goal is achieved, the messenger of God who is protecting England and is removing its obstacles and solving its problems will no longer serve as its shield. England will remain here so long as India needs it. Once this need is fulfilled, it will have to go back; because the British rule neither came here by virtue of its own power, nor it is surviving on its strength. India will achieve its goal whether England helps it or not or even if it opposes."

In the first decade of twentieth century, except for Bang-Bhang movement, there was hardly any incident, by which it would appear that the dormant consciousness of India was getting awakened. There was certainly fierce opposition to the division of Bengal. However it was not that strong that one could forecast on its basis the independence of India. Yogi Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, who initiated Sri Aurobindo into Yogavidya, called the revolutionaries opposing this division as the instruments of God. He also said that India is a nation that will achieve freedom through Divine Dispensation.

A Country Preferred by God

In the following lines the context that is being described matches very well with this message of Yogi Lele. It was the year 1972, when Param Poojya Gurudev Pandit Sriram Sharma Acharyaji had just returned from the Himalayas after spending about six months in some spiritually surcharged esoteric regions. Gurudev was sitting on a chair on the first floor of the main building of Shantikunj, where now his and Mataji's Padukas (wooden slippers) are kept. A discussion on the research on how to acquaint the world about the grandeur and glory of India was going on. If we wish to tell the world about our greatness and glory, we need the facts and figures too. The aim of research was to collect such material evidences. The findings of this research were later published in the form of a book titled 'Samast Vishwa ko Bharat ke Ajasra Anudan' (India's Perennial Gifts to the World). In the writings and speeches of Gurudev, he stressed that India was the Land of Divine Play. A parijan asked him 'Why God is specially attached to India and takes birth here? We consider ourselves the inheritors of the oldest civilization and culture in the world. If we are no less than others in power, knowledge, skills and organization, then why were we slaves for centuries? If we were very powerful and brave, the aggressors should have never succeeded.'

This question of the parijan was not to express doubt or blame anyone but was out of curiosity. Not many people had the information of the return of Gurudev from Himalayas. Hardly four-six persons used to visit him daily. At that time Gurudev used to work in a room adjacent to Mataji's chamber. In reply to the parijan's query Gurudev gave a short answer: "India is a country preferred by God. Don't you know that God has incarnated twenty four times in physical form in this land and has established Truth and Divinity? One cannot estimate the number of Indian sages, seers, saints, yogis, etc. If one counts the number of saints born in all other countries and weighs them with their Indian counterparts, the latter's pan will be heavier. The numerous schools of thought, faiths, sadhana-sects, that are alive and active here cannot be found elsewhere in the world. The remarkable thing is that there exists harmony among all the currents of intellectual and spiritual seekings. Had there been such diverse currents of thought elsewhere, the concerned scholars would have perpetually engaged in denunciation of each other. In India, there is diversity in nature, seasons, rivers, mountains, flora and fauna and even amongst the residents of different parts of the country. Observing this diversity can't we realize that India is a country preferred by God? Here He is incessantly doing newer and newer experiments with human nature."

After a moment's pause Gurudev looked at the parijan intently. Whatever was said in words, far more was transmitted through that gaze. That parijan writes his experience as follows – "The incident inspired me to recollect the memory of my childhood. Whenever I used to encounter any complex question, I would go to my father. He would not directly answer my question nor would he quote any facts / figures; he would tell a few basic things and give an affectionate look. I would forget what the answer to my question was. After listening to his talk and absorbing his affectionate glance I used to get satisfied. It appeared as if I got the key. The book is a closed box which is locked. Get the key, open the lock and find the solution. A short address by Gurudev and his affectionate glance of few moments revived the memories of my childhood."

"If you want the solution through logic that is also there" - Gurudev said again–"The world is like a wheel. When it revolves, some spokes go up while others come down. This is what exactly happened to India. No race remains on top for ever. The rise is followed by downfall. The slavery of few hundred years may be considered the downfall; but that did not ruin it. Several races have succumbed to the subjection of hardly a few hundred years. The ancient civilizations of Greece, Egypt, Iran and Rome could not survive. Their original civilizations have vanished long back. India was subjugated and suppressed far longer than the civilizations of these countries. Even then, today it is standing on its own feet. Will you call it the destruction of India or the proof of its will to survive? Even if you see in the light of facts, you will find that there is something that has kept India intact and unconquerable.

One more sample of the grace of Rishisattas (seers and sages) was observed in the form of a major incident in December 1971. Those days India-Pakistan war was going on. Almost everyone knows the circumstances prior to this war. Thousands of refugees were crossing over to India everyday from East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh). The rulers of Pakistan were torturing the public brutally. The natural resources of East Pakistan were mostly used by the governing people in West Pakistan. People of East Pakistan bore this brunt for nearly twenty years and raised their voice for their just and lawful rights. Instead of fulfilling their genuine demands, the rulers adopted the policy of negligence and repression. When this repression and tyranny became unbearable, the people of East Pakistan revolted. When the government's repressive measures took the form of brutality, the people's resistance took the shape of the wild fire of a bloody revolution which resulted in the creation of Bangla Desh as an independent state.

Divine Intervention

India too could not remain unaffected by this freedom struggle of Bangla Desh. Those who could not bear the prevailing fiery circumstances started fleeing the country; and for them the obvious destination was India. The number of people reaching India went on increasing from thousands to lakhs to crores. India had to bear the burden of feeding these refugees. Those days, the resources were meager; so by levying extra taxes on citizens, the Indian Government was somehow managing the situation.

Not satisfied with the brutal torture of the people of Bangla Desh, the rulers of Pakistan, under the compulsion of political upheaval, declared war on India. The pressure started increasing on eastern and western borders from July 1971, which took the shape of full-fledged war within a few weeks. Those days it appeared that the superpowers too were with Pakistan. There was fierce fighting on both the fronts. Within

2-3 days Pakistan's army was losing the war and it started retreating. When the countries friendly to the attacker sensed the marching forward of Indian army on the Bangla Desh front, they started preparing to take the matter to the Security Council; and USA was leading this initiative. The purpose of such an exercise was obviously to put moral pressure on India.

USA did not stop here. It also increased strategic pressure by ordering its Seventh Fleet to move towards the Indian Ocean. At that time it was world's mightiest armada which carried a fleet armed with warplanes, missiles, guns and sufficient arms and ammunition. From strategic point of view, it was so powerful that it could change the outcome of Indo-Pak war. At that time, Indian Navy too was not strong enough to confidently face the might of the US naval power. As Indo-Pak war turned fierce, the decision in India's favour was certain within a week or ten days; but after the Seventh Fleet started moving towards Indian Ocean, the circumstances took a different turn. However, suddenly news came on the morning of December 7, 1971 that the Seventh Fleet had reversed its direction and that it was moving away from Indian shores.

What happened? How the circumstances changed overnight? There was no political initiative, no pressure of world polity. Analysts, who are pioneers in American administrative procedures, say that after reaching this stage, Pentagon (America's Defence Headquarters) never changed its decision. There is no instance of ordering a naval fleet to move forward and then ordering it to return, in the history of America or any other country. Why did the Defence Ministry of America reverse its decision? The power of declaring or stopping the war rests only with the American President. What was the sudden compulsion confronting the then President, Richard Nixon, which forced him to retreat? Strategic analysts could not find the answer to this puzzle till date.

Was there any Divine intervention? At that time too, there was such a curiosity among the people having faith in God. One sadhak Mohan Devangan of Rajnadgaon (Chhattisgarh) dreamt in the early morning of December 7, 1971 that the American Fleet after crossing the Indian Ocean was entering the Bay of Bengal. It was crossing the border of Sri Lanka and was accelerating its speed every minute. There seemed to be no visible signs of the place but it appeared the warship was right at that point where Rameshwaram Bridge was built. At that spot some stones seemed to be floating. On those stones 'Ram' was engraved. The sadhak who was watching this scene in the dream further saw that a warship (obviously Seventh Fleet) was passing through that region. Suddenly there was a flash of lightening and a hand with a clinched fist rose from the sea water. First of all the fist appeared, then the forearm, the elbow and the hand seemed to be touching the sky. The fist then opened up and the palm got wider and slowly fully covered the warship. The next moment the situation became normal. The sea appeared calm. The Sadhak in the dream was realizing that the shape of hand appeared to be similar to the one holding 'Flaming Torch' (the emblem of our mission).

Dev Kanyas reciting japa near Akhand Deep in Shantikunj also had almost a similar vision. Before the news of the retreat of Seventh Fleet broke out, Vandaniya Mataji told the sadhaks who came for pranam in the early morning, "A disaster has been averted. Now India will surely win this war; no power in the world can defeat it. You will see that, once the war is over, India will progress day by day. It has to shoulder the responsibility of leading the world and very soon it is going to become capable of it." Ten days after Mother's forecast and omens and dream-visions of the sadhaks, India won the war; and demonstrated to the world that in spite of its being a developing country, it was capable of facing any challenge and no one could defeat it.

After this victory, India progressed day by day on all the fronts. In fact this destiny of India was written long back. 'The Tryst with Destiny' that India's first Prime Minister Pt Jawahar Lal Nehru mentioned in his famous speech on August 15, 1947 had already been announced long time back; it was made manifest in the year 1911, when Acharya Sriram Sharma was born.

Circumstances Started Changing

Year **1911** holds a very important place in the history of India. Lord Curzon had divided Bengal six years back. The decision of the viceroy had so enraged the people that they began to boycott all English things, especially clothes made in England. It was in these days that the slogan 'Vande Mataram' began to resound through out India. The consciousness of people was motivated to look upon and worship Mother India as Goddess and strengthen their resolve to free her from the shackles of British slavery. The government could not tolerate the non-cooperation movement. It resorted to methods of suppression and oppression. All those who participated in the movement were fined or made to forego some comforts or made to lose their jobs etc. The movement did not stop even after these highhanded methods. Suppression infuriated the people all the more. Armed revolutionary activities kicked off. Historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar writes that this was the first time when Indians offered open opposition to British rule. In those days, many secret societies began to be formed all over the country and their only goal was to uproot the British rule. Not only Bengal, but far-off regions like Punjab and Madras too expressed open opposition to foreign rule. Even the stringent measures of the government could not put a stop to the revolutionary activities. They could not be stopped with anything less than annulment of the partition of Bengal. In December 1911, during the Delhi Durbar, Emperor George-V and the Queen announced the annulment of partition.

An Important Turning-point

In another announcement at Delhi Durbar, it was decided to shift the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi. Both the announcements proved to be complementary to each other. The shifting of the capital cooled down the fury of the revolutionaries. British government got the advantage of not confronting public fury immediately. Lord Hardinge, who played a significant role in this decision, had to face lot of criticism from British officials in India as well as from people of England. But time proved that his decision was correct. Three years after this, World War-I broke out. The Indian princes and the elite in the society openly supported the British. After the world war ended, the British refused to abide by many of their previous promises but the wave of self-confidence and awakening that had risen in Indian society kept growing stronger with time.

The political incidents in 1911 proved decisive in regard to the future direction of India. Even in social and cultural fronts, many important activities were in progress. In that year, Indian culture and spirituality received an avenue for expression. In those days of new awakening, great thinkers and leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, Maharshi Debendranath Thakur, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Gopal

Krishna Gokhale, Lokmanya Tilak, etc were making people aware of the golden past of India and its inner grandeur. European scholars like Madam Blavatsky, Colonel Alcott and Annie Besant were singing praises of Indian spirituality. The bugle of Indian spirituality and culture sounded by Swami Vivekananda in the Occident was echoed through the thoughts and actions of these great personalities.

Western scholars were unanimous in praise of Indian religion and philosophy and were nurturing the dream of creating a new world based on these principles, but they were ignorant of many facets of Sanatan Dharma. Some great Indians were also disposed towards this kind of thinking. Ramdhari Singh Dinkar analyzes the situation and writes thus, "These people wanted to support only refined Hinduism devoid of its rich variety and depth. The fact was that in spite of the influential thoughts of these great reformers, people were still engrossed in the worship of stone deities and were not ready to give up the traditional ways of worship. The reformed Hinduism present in those days had become an Indian version of reformed Christianity."

Indian Soul in a Foreign Body

Annie Besant described refined or so-called progressive Hinduism to be incomplete. Wherever and whenever an appropriate context was found, she began presenting the complete and true form of Sanatan Dharma by narrating and quoting not only from Vedas, Upanishads and Gita but also from Smritis, Puranas, Dharma Shastras and Mahakavyas. When people unconvinced by the reformers heard words like re-birth, incarnation, God, yoga, jap, tap, anushtan, siddhis and 84 lakh yonis from the mouth of Annie Besant who was born, brought-up and educated in England, they were astounded and impressed. Her advocacy of inclusive culture of India left them ashamed. In a speech delivered in 1911 she declared, "Only India and its people can protect Sanatan Dharma. After 40 years of study and intense research, I have arrived at the conclusion that Sanatan Dharma is the most scientific, profound and spiritual amongst various religions across the world. Only the people here can save and protect it. However much we outsiders praise you, your salvation lies in your own hands. Do not be under any illusion. Without Sanatan Dharma, India has no future."

The picture of Sanatan Dharma that Annie Besant presented to Western scholars and to her Indian followers was based on Vedas, Upanishads, Darshans, Smritis, Ramayan, Mahabharat, Puranas etc. In her version, all gods-goddesses, siddha atmas, avataras, and all forms of worship of the attributes of God and the attribute-less God were included. Their vibrations could be especially experienced in Teerths, ashrams, temples etc. The expression of the divinity could vary from intense contemplation to ordinary faith and beliefs of the masses. Annie Besant, the great Indologist and devotee from Britain also inspired the efforts for Indian Independence after the year 1920, but her basic contribution was cultural in nature.

In the Central Hindu College of Banaras, Annie Besant spoke thus about a branch of Indian philosophy called Mimamsa – "The first aim for any enlightened Indian should be the rejuvenation, awakening and strengthening of Sanatan Dharma. Self-respect, adoration of the past, confidence in the future and the responsibility of reconstructing new India and the new world order go hand in hand with the efforts towards re-establishing Sanatan Dharma." This speech was delivered in **1911**. It is to be noted that Annie Besant was the founder of this college. She invested her ancestral wealth to set up and develop this college which in later days evolved into Banaras Hindu University. Pt.

Madan Mohan Malaviya , Gayatri Mahamantra Guru of our story's hero, contributed the most towards the establishment of this university.

Invocation in the Subtle World

Banaras scholars addressed Annie Besant as "Sarvashukla Saraswati". It is necessary to know about a secret announcement made by her. In reality this announcement was from Madam Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophical Society. The followers of the society believe that Madam Blavatsky was in contact with many Himalayan saints both in their bodily forms and in their subtle forms. Based on the inspirations she received from them, the society's scholar-founder had made many secret announcements. One of them was that the Himalayan rishis were determined to inspire India towards fulfillment of her destiny as spiritual guide of humanity. According to their plan, a capable and divine soul was assuming a physical body and would lay the foundations of the spiritual revolution during his lifetime on earth and would then continue working for its full manifestation in due time from the subtle-causal realms.

Colonel Alcott, an associate of Madam Blavatsky, was sure that Bodhisatva (an avatar of Lord Buddha) was about to incarnate. If the required circumstances for his birth were not ready, it was possible that he might choose any body and do his work through the medium of that physical body. Annie Besant's experience was different from this. In public life, and especially people working towards political awakening of the masses do not express their secret experiences to others lest they affect their public image. But Annie Besant was a spiritually awakened person and she shared her experience with a select group of aspirants.

While explaining about a meditation procedure to a few sadhaks in Australia, Annie Besant told that this experiment was likely to put them in contact with subtle worlds. While conducting one of these experiments, she had a vision that a child would be born in 1911 whose arrival had been long-awaited in the subtle worlds. He would grow up as a normal child and would get spiritually activated slowly and that as he became fully active, the clouds veiling Sanatan Dharma would be dispelled. It would then shine forth in full brightness and glory.

Students of Colonel Alcott and other scholars of Theosophy were present in that camp. One of them asked a question, "Great people have told that Bodhisatva will incarnate with a set of pre-determined characteristics, on the basis of which he will be recognized as an avatar of Buddha. Your experience is different from them, why?" In reply to this question Annie Besant told that she was just sharing the vision she had during her meditative state and that her intention was not to counter what other great people had said. Even if certain differences were apparent, it did not imply that the truth was different. The same truth appeared differently, based on one's position and vision.

Indications of the Arrival of Pragyavatar

Annie Besant shared her vision with others on a few occasions. The discussion happened among sadhaks that Annie Besant's vision was significantly different from others. She was neither announcing a miracle nor talking of recurrence of the Lilas of Rama and Krishna. Her announcement was that a child born in this year (1911) would possess such an intense and bright disposition that he would guide millions of people on the path of spiritual quest and would kindle a ray of hope in human destiny in general.

Where would that child be born? What kind of family background would he have? On which day and under what astrological conditions would he be born? She made no mention of these details. Annie Besant's indication was made spontaneously and as a reassurance. There was no motive of predicting about a miraculous event of the future that would relieve people of their anxiety.

Annie Besant had offered clarification in a class room in Banaras in the year of 1911. It is possible that it was 4th February and the day was 5th in the lunar calendar – Vasant Panchami. She spoke to a group of sadhaks thus – "There is abundant energy latent in Sanatan Dharma and that energy is not due to any planetary or zodiac influence but is its inherent nature. Whenever fog deepens and blurs the true form, there comes a situation when its glory bursts forth in utmost grandeur. Sanatan Dharma is not only the basis of future of India but that of the entire world. It is not possible for a normal soul with limited capability to clean the dirt surrounding it. Only a divine and special soul guided and supported by siddha purushas who derive their energy and nourishment from Sanatan Dharma can accomplish this mammoth task. That time has come now." The hero of our story and the founder, protector, mentor and head of All World Gayatri Pariwar was born in this very year (1911) on 20th September in a village called Aanwalkheda in the house of Pandit Roop Kishore and Mother Daan Kunwari Devi.

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From Yamuna to Ganga

Four months after the passing of the Banaras Hindu University Act in October 1915, the University was established on *Magh Shukla Pratipada of Samvat 1972* (February 1916); the then Viceroy Lord Hardinge laid the foundation stone. Many dignitaries including Governor of Bengal, Deputy Governors of three provinces, twelve rulers of princely states, many scholars, landlords, businessmen, etc. were present on this occasion. In fact, this university was an evolved and developed form of the Central Hindu College started by Annie Besant. The resolution to start a university was taken almost five years earlier. Annie Besant, Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya, Rameswar Singh – the ruler of Durbhanga, had together started the work. It was decided that once rupees fifty lakhs had been deposited in the bank and there was a distinct possibility of raising another rupees one crore, the process of establishing the university could begin.

It was possible to collect the required money with the help of Government and a few other princes. But Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya proposed that they also seek the help of the general public. The motive behind seeking donations from the general public was to establish a bond of love and cooperation with them. With the hefty contributions from the rich and the small donations collected from the public, rupees 21 lakhs had been collected by March 1913. It took two more years to meet the target of rupees 50 lakhs. The annual contributions of the rulers of Bikaner, Jodhpur and Kashmir states were also included in the fund. An appeal was made to scholars, leaders, social workers, purohits and teachers all over the country to offer their cooperation. People from different walks of life came together and worked day and night to meet the financial targets. In a span of five years, more than half of the required amount had been raised. Collections included even a handful of grains and one paisa.

Among those who were collecting donations for Banaras Hindu University in Vraj, Pandit Roop Kishore Sharma was the foremost. He was a resident of Anwalkheda, a village near Agra. He was a staunch devotee of the Lord and an eminent scholar of *Bhagavat Mahapuran*. He traveled far and wide to give discourses on *Bhagavat*. Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya was very much influenced by his style of expression and commentary. Both of them had stayed in the same *Gurukul* for some time but the basis of their relationship was nothing other than love towards *Bhagavat*. It was Malaviyaji who gave the idea of soliciting support for *Sanatan Dharma* from the listeners of *Bhagavat* narration. Once it was decided that Panditji would collect small amounts of money from the listeners; Malaviyaji set for him a target of rupees 11,000. Pandit Roop Kishoreji sent this amount in several installments. This contribution included the donations made by people who invited him to give talks on *Bhagavat*. There is no clear account on how much money was sent from where. A large chunk of money was sent as *Gupt Daan* (undisclosed contribution).

Having worked for raising funds, Pandit Roop Kishoreji was also present on the inaugural function of Banaras Hindu University. A few scholars and purohits of Vraj were also with him. A few family members and relatives also accompanied him so that they may see Kashi. The family also included a five and a half years old child. Panditji busied himself in the work related to the function along with two other associates. Others were occupied with visiting the temples of Kashi, having a dip in the Ganga, *Anushthan* and other activities.

The foundation laying celebrations continued for several days. The aim of the university was to teach students about the most modern sciences, while also making them understand the fundamental principles of *Sanatan Dharma* and Indian Culture. It was a part of Banaras Hindu University Act that the university will provide highest level of education on Hindu spiritual sciences. Students from all religions and backgrounds could study here. It was made mandatory that only a person who believes in Hindu Dharma could become the rector of the university. It was also arranged as part of the University Act that there will be a number of other prominent persons as members, apart from the government nominees, in the governing body.

Some people tried to put pressure so that the word 'Hindu' be removed from the name of the university. Such pressures were ignored right from the beginning. Later Mahatma Gandhi reprimanded those who asked for removal of word 'Hindu' from the name.

Deekshaguru (Initiator) Meets His Disciple

It is natural that the inaugural ceremony included rituals like *Yagya*, discourses, narration of the scriptures etc. Pt. Roop Kishoreji was assigned a part of this program's responsibility. Many scholars and purohits had come to take part in the scheduled religious rituals. Panditji was involved in arranging for their accommodation, taking them around the town and providing their general needs. During that time he was not aware of his family's whereabouts. He did not know where they were put up or what they were eating. He was so absorbed in the job assigned to him that he hardly took any notice or care of even himself.

It was five days into inaugural ceremony celebrations. It was the day of *Vasant Panchami* - the day of manifestation of Goddess Sarasvati, the deity of learning and knowledge. Many activities like meetings and conference of dignitaries were in progress. *Sarasvati Puja* was the special attraction of the day. The stage was decorated with mango leaves and boughs. 60-70 students and teachers were seated in front of the stage. *Yagya Kund* was also placed in front of the stage. *Yagya* began with chanting of Vedic mantras. Malaviyaji was conducting the ritual of *Yagya*. The students seated in the front were also chanting mantras along with him. Among these students was Shriram, the son of Roop Kishoreji. The age of the child was about 5 years. Generally, the child was always with his mother and family. That day, Panditji brought Shriram with him with some plan in his mind. Probably his idea was to enable the child to attend the *Sarasvati Puja* and also benefit from the company of Malaviyaji for some time.

When students recited the mantras, it added to the beauty and ambience of the whole place. It was natural for small children to commit some mistakes in chanting. When such mistakes crept in, no one took notice of them. The renowned scholars and teachers felt that it was best to encourage the students. The youngest of the students was Shriram. Whenever he recited the mantras, Malaviya ji's attention would turn to him. He could not turn his expectant gaze away on seeing such a small child reciting mantras. After completing the Puja of the deity of the day, Malaviyaji came to the child and lovingly caressed his head.

The moment Malaviyaji approached, the child Shriram prostrated at his feet. He asked the child lovingly, "Who is your father, child?" Before Shriram could answer, Pandit Roop Kishoreji stepped forward and stood humbly in front of Malaviyaji and said that Shriram was his son. Malaviyaji then asked a couple of things about the boy. He stared intently at the boy for a few minutes and then asked, "Is his *upanayana* done?" Panditji replied, "The *upanayana* is yet to be done. We will be fortunate if it could be done by you.

Malaviyaji's face brightened up with a smile as though this was exactly what he expected and that Panditji gave words to his thoughts. Malaviyaji readily agreed to initiate Shriram and give him a formal *Mantra Diksha* at the appropriate time, but as the *sankalpa* had been taken, he could be considered initiated from that day itself. That opportune time was to come a few years later. That day was full of other activities. Annie Besant's discourse was also scheduled on that day. Malaviyaji was scheduled to have personal meetings with Maharaj Krishnaraj Vadiyar, the ruler of Mysore state and other dignitaries.

The inaugural ceremony was undoubtedly an important event for the university, but many incidents were triggered during this event that proved to be historic turning points. The ceremony depicted the blend of *Sanatan Dharma* and Indian culture with the modern streams of education. It was here that Mahatma Gandhi gave his historic speech on patriotism in which he had challenged all the influential and talented Indians, bluntly telling them that they had turned their backs to their responsibilities towards the Motherland and its freedom from foreign subjugation.

Princes present during this speech got agitated at Gandhiji's criticism. They staged a walkout from the program. Annie Besant was also among the protestors who left the place. Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya remained seated calmly during this session. He did not bother about people's protests.

Panditji – An Associate of Mahamana

Among the associates of Mahamana Malaviyaji, Roop Kishoreji was held in high esteem. He was a dedicated worker in politics, education, service-oriented tasks and in addition to all this he gave discourses on *Bhagavat* and held discussions on its teachings. Pt. Roop Kishoreji was known as Maharshi Vyasa in his native place. But he always considered himself an humble disciple and associate of Malaviyaji. He was recognized in the entire Vraj Mandal as a propagator of Malaviyaji's mission of revival of *Sanatan Dharma*.

Speech has an impact but it should be strongly supported by unwavering faith in the words being spoken. This strength comes from imbibing those principles in one's own life before preaching them to others. The text of *Bhagavat*, which talks of Divine grace and devotion, is capable of cleansing the sins of even ghosts and vampires. The story of the ghost of Dhundhkari is narrated every time while talking about the greatness of *Bhagavat*. Life of Panditji was an embodiment of the qualities of compassion and devotion in their fullest glory. Many people reformed their lives after coming in contact with him. There were innumerable instances of people shedding their vices and bad habits. There was an incident in which Dhandhu, a jungle-dacoit, was transformed through Panditji's *Satsang* and he gave up his wicked means of earning livelihood. He had terrorized the entire region. He did not have group of his own but he himself was so strong that he could alone handle and fight 25-30 people.

Once Panditji was going to give a discourse and encountered Dhandhu. He began telling, 'You are a Brahmin. Hence I will not show any disrespect towards you. But I have to do this job to earn my livelihood. If I give up robbing, I will not be able to fend for those who depend on me. I will not exercise force on you. I only want that you hand over all your valuables quietly to me." Dhandhu uttered all this with full force. Any ordinary person would have panicked on hearing the stern voice of the dacoit and trembled in fear. But his frightening demeanor had no effect on Panditji. He maintained the same composure as he had before he encountered the dacoit. Seeing that his threat was in vain, the dacoit was surprised. He asked again whether Panditji heard what was said. Panditji replied, "I have heard everything. But I will not give you even a penny. If you come to listen to my discourse, I promise that I will give all that will be collected as offerings." Dhandhu's eyes widened with amazement. The conversation continued between them for some time. Ultimately he agreed to accompany him for the discourse. He listened attentively the discourses on *Bhagavat* for one full week. His old *sanskaras* would pop their head out intermittently. He would then begin to shout and threaten people. But this did not continue for long. At the conclusion of week-long *Bhagvat Katha*, Panditji collected in a bundle the offerings and gave it to Dhandhu. The bundle was made up of cash offerings and ornaments. Dhandhu lifted the bundle onto his head and said, "Command me my lord. Where do we go?" Panditji replied, "I have kept my promise. You are free to go wherever you want." Dhandhu threw down the bundle and fell at Panditji's feet. He began to cry loudly and said, "I have found my path. Please forgive me. From now on I will work hard and earn an honest livelihood." In all humility he again put the bundle on his head and carried it to Panditji's home. Whoever witnessed or heard this miracle found it hard to believe that the dreaded dacoit Dhandhu had been transformed!

The Extraordinary Experience of Motherhood

There was an old mansion in Aanwalkheda. There lived a joint family with brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles. There was a continuous flow of visitors, relatives and seekers in the house. It was always busy with activity. Pt. Roop Kishoreji was 55 years old then. Everybody in the household used to call his wife Daan Kunwari Devi as 'Taiji' (elder aunt). Panditji was the eldest among all his brothers and sisters in the family. So, it was natural for all the younger ones to call him 'Tauji' and his wife 'Taiji'. Taiji took great care of all the family members. She was like an elder sister or mother to all the family members. She would wake up early in the morning and work incessantly all day for the family and the guests who visited their house and would go to bed late in the night.

In 1911, she had the first experience of motherhood. Taiji began to have some unique and wonderful experiences. She would tell confidently that these experiences were neither evoking fear nor anxiety in her. When she spoke about her feelings to the elderly ladies in their neighborhood, they said that it was the sign of family deity being pleased. Later she realized that it was not just about the grace of their ancestors and family deity. She told about an incident of one morning when she was boiling milk after having completed her bath and daily worship. She was as usual thinking about the other morning chores. She typically possessed immense energy that even after working till late in the night, she still felt full of energy. She did not feel any trace of fatigue even after working continuously for hours. For some reason, that morning she felt sleepy and her eyes began to droop. In that sleep, she had a dream.

The dream was in an unknown forest. She was alone in that solitary place. Golden rays of the Sun were diffused in all directions. Sun was rising in the east like a golden ball of fire and had scattered its fiery hues in the eastern horizon. The radiance of that rising Sun was spreading everywhere. The fragrance present in the atmosphere had Taiji mesmerized. She was completely engrossed in the beauty of the atmosphere. The rising Sun began to come out in all its majesty and glory. At the centre of the fiery ball, she could see the outlines of a woman. A resplendent divine form was seated on a swan. She had *kamandal* in her right hand and a book in her left hand. Taiji could not clearly see what book it was. She thought that it was *Bhagavat* since her husband was a renowned scholar of this *Mahapuran*. She could see that divine form for a few moments and then it vanished. She opened her eyes to see milk boiling out of the vessel and falling into the earthen stove. It was with that sizzling sound of burning milk in the fire that her trance was broken.

She narrated this dream to her husband. She also told him that the divine form had *Bhagavat* in her hand. Her husband clarified that they were the Vedas and not *Bhagavat*. Entire *Bhagavat* is an exposition of one verse in the Vedas. *Bhagavat, Ramayan*, etc have been composed as elaborations of Gayatri Mantra or to give detailed explanations of the inspirations that surge forth from Gayatri Mantra.

Taiji had a similar dream once again. One afternoon, she was taking a short break from her work after finishing her lunch. While she was still present in the kitchen preparing for evening chores, Taiji went into *Bhavasamadhi* in which she found herself standing beside a lake. There were lotuses in full bloom. She saw the same divine form sitting on one of the big lotuses in the lake. In one of her dreams, she saw that an airplane with *Devatas* flew in from the East. The *Devatas* sitting in it were showering flowers. According to Panditji, this vision was related to some stirrings in the subtle worlds. Indications could also be interpreted as the changes in one's consciousness. Whenever a divine soul is to take birth and has already entered the womb, such visions and dreams are experienced.

Strange incidents began to occur in their house and vicinity also. Taiji used to tell that suddenly some fragrance would envelop the house as though incense sticks had been lit or as though some *yagya* was being performed. The fragrance would linger on for sometime and then gradually vanish. Suddenly cows began to come to their residential mansion in the village. There was a shed adjacent to the house where the cows were kept. In addition to their own cows, there would at times come more than 8-10 cows and stand at their doorstep. Those were the cows belonging to other families living in Aanwalkheda. When they found their cattle missing, they would start their search for them and be surprised to find them at Panditji's house. Typically one tends to shoo away other's animals, but Taiji had undergone strange transformation because of which, instead of shooing those cows away, she began to worship them and offer them food.

Taiji indeed behaved unnaturally when bees came into their house in droves and began humming. They came in such numbers that in a week's time, they had made 4-5 beehives. All the members of the family experienced inconvenience because of the bees. Though they were not stinging anyone, there was unrest in the family because of them. They then thought of a scheme to scare the bees away. In villages, the common practice to disrupt a hive was to light a fire and create smoke.

When Taiji learnt about their plan to send the bees away, she was upset. She was the one who moved around the house most and hence the inconvenience to her was also more than to others, but she somehow did not like the idea of disrupting the hives. She shouted in a stern voice that bees were not hurting anyone but were living in their hives. Why then were they hurting them? On this outburst of Taiji, everyone calmed down.

Panditji was not at home during this incident. He had gone out to perform *Bhagavat Katha* and returned after 8-10 days. When he learnt about the incident, he supported Taiji. He explained that the spiritual significance of the phenomenon of the bees coming and making hives in their home was a symbol of Lord Shiva's grace. When a divine soul was to take birth, it was with the blessings of Shiva. The creatures sent by him were gathering honey from flowers. This has to be understood as the sign of grace and blessings of Lord Shiva for the soul that is to embody.

Congratulations Echo from all Directions

On 20th September 1911, Taiji gave birth to a baby boy at nine in the morning at their ancestral house in village Aanwalkheda situated on

Agra-Jalesar route. Those were the days of *Pitrupaksh*. According to *Sanatan Dharma*, it is considered auspicious to leave one's body or take birth during this period. It is said that those who leave their body in *Pitrupaksh* need not spend time wandering in the other worlds. There is no desire or want pending in them that they have to stay in a bodiless state waiting for its fulfillment. The soul either directly goes to *pitrulok* or assumes a new body immediately. The souls that embody during this time are said to have arrived at the gates of liberation (*mukti*). They have taken up a body so as to work out some remnants of karma.

It is also a belief that those born in *Pitrupaksh* are none other than a scholarly ancestor who has come back to restore or increase the glory and fame of their family tradition and to pay back those who have helped and assisted him in the past. Based on his birth in *pitrupaksh* and also bearing in mind the incidents that occurred before his birth, the *pandits* of Anwalkheda asserted that a yogi had taken birth in the house of Pandit Roop Kishoreji. At the age of 55, he had obtained this great boon.

The birth of the child brought festivities not only at his home but also in the entire village. There were 30-40 houses in the village. The incidents before his birth – cows coming to their house, bees making their hives in the house, and the experiences narrated by Taiji, spread not only in their village but also in neighboring villages. When these events occurred, scholarly and learned elderly people predicted that a soul of a yogi would be born in Panditji's house. When the child was born, wealthy and famous people from various villages in whose house Panditji had done *Bhagavat Katha* also came to see the child. The inhabitants of Aanwalkheda found their coming to be a natural thing. What appeared special was the sudden influx of *sanyasis* and *sadhus* to the village. Typically, just a mendicant or two would wander into the village. After the child was born, about 4-5 *sadhus* began to visit every day. On the day the child was born, a tall, well-built and radiant *sadhu* came and stood at the doorstep of the house. On hearing the cries of the baby, he expressed his desire to see the baby. Taiji was hesitant but agreed on Panditji's intervention. On seeing the child, the *sadhu* raised both his hands and blessed the child for a long and illustrious life and then left the place.

Taiji used to say that on the day this boy was born, the place started resonating with some sweet and divine music. Until the next morning, one could hear the recitation of mantras and Ramayana reverberating in the house. This could have been experienced by Taiji because of the inner tranquility she was experiencing. But she was visibly upset at the visits of *sadhus* who stood at the doorstep gazing quietly at the child. When they were offered something, they plainly refused. They just wanted to see the child and once he began to cry, they would leave the place. Even Panditji found it strange that so many *sadhus* visited his house, but he was never worried about it. He tried to console Taiji when she worried too much about these happenings.

The child was 16-17 days old when it was arranged to conduct the naming ceremony. A strange incident occurred that day which ruffled the calm of Panditji too. The auspicious day of *Vijayadashami* was chosen for the ceremony. According to the tradition in the village, the day of *Vijayadashami* was spent in reciting 'Ramcharit Manas', 'Saptashati' etc. They typically did not conduct Ramlila or burn the effigy of Ravana. Due to the birth of the child, they were observing *sutak* (state of ritual impurity existing after a birth or a death in one's household) because of which the family members did not conduct any special *Navaratri puja*. Only regular rituals of *sandhyavandan* were being observed. The *sutak* was over on the day of *Navami* and the same day, they started the incessant recitation of Ramacharit Manas (*Akhand Parayan*). It was planned that on the next day they will have the *Purnahuti* and *yagya* followed by naming ceremony.

Almost everyone in the village attended the *Purnahuti* of Ramcharit Manas recitation, *yagya* and naming ceremony. People began to gather since the early hours of *Vijayadashami*. Whoever walked in observed a *sanyasi* standing at the doorstep. After sometime a female mendicant (*Sadhvi*) came and joined him. They did not converse amongst themselves but continued to stand undisturbed till the naming ceremony commenced. Once the ceremony began, both of them walked into the house and began to gaze at the child lying in Taiji's lap. When Taiji noticed both of them, she was taken aback and tried to cover the child with her *saree*. At that, the *sadhu* said, "O Mother, let us also see the little one. Let us gaze at him to our heart's content. Only God knows whether we will get another chance to see him or not." Taiji interpreted that he was speaking something inauspicious about the child and became angry. She stood up from the dais and started taking both of them to task. Both of them offered their explanation but Taiji's anger was not to be assuaged. Panditji got up and said, "Let it be, Shriram's mother. Nothing untoward will happen to your child. Everything will be fine and auspicious". On hearing this the *sanyasis* left imploring that the child be named as 'Shriram' in accordance to what had come out from his father's mouth involuntarily. He said that it was the desire of the Lord that the child be named thus. Panditji agreed to the suggestion and Taiji did not argue further. The *sadhu* and *sadhvi* stood at the doorstep till the ceremony was completed.

There is another incident in which an old *sanyasi* stood for one and a half hours at the doorstep. Taiji was worried and walked out of the house and asked the *sadhu* why he was casting an evil eye on the child and what harm the child had done to him. On hearing this, the *sadhu* clarified that he had not come to do anything evil to the child and that he had come to just see him. He said that, 'I got a feeling that a great soul from the Himalayas has taken birth in your house. So, I have just come to see the child. Let me just take a short glance at him and I will go away." The mother abided by *Sanyasi's* wishes and showed him the child. She also clarified that she will not show the child to any *sadhus* from then on and that no one should come to their house with such a request.

She then went to her room and sat in front of Lord Krishna and kept crying for a long time. The mother was confused and alarmed at the various terms like Soul from the Himalayas, *Siddha purush, Sanyasi* etc and was worried if she would be separated from her child in the future and if he would become a mendicant of some kind. It is possible that the mother would have prayed to her revered deity that she be never separated from her child and that he always stayed with her. What the devotee asked her Lord is completely a private conversation. But the visible result was that saints and mendicants stopped visiting their house after that day.

The initial 3-4 years were spent with parents enjoying their child learning to walk and utter his first words. Three years after the birth of Shriram, one more girl-child entered the family. She was named Kiran Devi. One more sister was born in due course and she was named Ram Devi. After the birth of his sisters, Taiji's attention got divided among her three kids. Until then she used to shoulder the entire responsibility of the house right from cooking food to hosting the guests. While doing all her household work, her eyes were always on Shriram. She rarely left her son under the care of any family member or even his father. The words uttered by mendicants regarding Shriram kept echoing in her mind. She was always tormented by this lurking fear that some *sadhu* or *sanyasi* might cast a spell on her son. After the birth of Kiran Devi, Taiji had to leave Shriram under the care of others, mostly under the care of his father. She tried to take full care of both Shriram and Kiran Devi. When Panditji was not at home, she made Shriram sleep along with the new-born and when his father was at home, she would leave him to his care.

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Satyam Param Dhimahi

B*hagavat Mahapuran* was Panditji's favorite scripture. He used to discuss the subtleties of the message of *Mahapuran* at all times – be it during the *Katha-pravachan* or otherwise. There was always a group of scholars at his residence holding discussions. Even in small gatherings, he would quote *shlokas* from *Bhagavat* and offer solutions to a variety of problems. Even when he was out on tour, people used to visit his home for seeking his sagely counsel. It goes without saying that whenever he was at home, people would flock around him. In those days, Taiji would hand over 3-year old Shriram to his father's care. When Panditji was talking to people or solving their problems, child Shriram would also be present in the same room. The child would either be involved in his own games or sit quietly and listen to the proceedings. Although it was difficult for a 3-4 year old kid to understand the discussion on scriptures, philosophy and other profound topics, but he did absorb the *samskaras* created in the atmosphere by those discussions. The child was definitely resplendent with good *samskaras* from past lives. We can also say that he was not in need of any more new *samskaras*. But the atmosphere could indeed help in blossoming forth of those *samskaras*.

Whenever his father initiated discussions on 'Significance of *Bhagavat*' as given in *Padma Puran* or about the 11th Canto of *Bhagavat*, Sriram would sit there quietly and stare at his father's face. Taiji used to tell that whenever Shriram heard about the dialogue between Bhakti and Narad, he would become very sad. In this episode, Bhakti was seated forlorn on the banks of river Yamuna. Two aged persons were lying unconscious near her. The lady who was trying to bring them back into conscious state was looking out for someone to help her. Some women were trying to console her. As a happy coincidence, Devarshi Narad reaches there and asks the lady to introduce herself.

The lady said, "My name is Bhakti. Gyan and Vairagya are my two sons. They have grown very old with the passage of time. The women present near me are the holy rivers Ganga, Yamuna etc. who are serving me. In spite of their efforts, they are not able to alleviate my grief." Bhakti further told that she had been ill-treated by people and hence been rendered weak and fragile. Deceit, fraud and misbehavior had made her diseased and feeble. After coming to Vrindavan, her situation had improved but her sons had not been freed from old age. Saying thus, Bhakti began to weep. The story moved on and Narad conveyed the message of *Bhagavat* to Bhakti.

Hearing about Bhakti's grief, the young child (Shriram) would get soaked in tears. His father continued the talk. Bhakti's condition became better after listening to *Bhagavat* and her sons also were restored to their original youthful form. In this talk, his father would emphasize that *Bhagavat* was the essence of all scriptures and spiritual texts. The

Sanatan Dharma that we practice today has come from *Bhagavat*. Knowledge, education, tradition, avatar, devotion, action, *mantra, yoga, sadhana*, history, *Puran* etc. are all assimilated in *Bhagavat*. Looking at the countenance of his father, Shriram would then feel reassured and hence resume his playful activities.

Ga for Gayatri

The discussions that were held in his mansion-house marked the beginning of his education. The traditional ceremony of *vidyarambh* took place after his fourth year. If Panditji wished, he could have himself taught Vedas and scriptures to his son. But he believed that a person should definitely obtain knowledge under the guidance of a teacher. There was a teacher by name Pandit Roopram in that tiny village who used to run a school at his residence. Panditji handed over his son to the teacher. Taiji used to tell that after a small worship the teacher handed over a *patti* (wooden board). It was painted white. There were no slates and slate-pencils during those days. There were different ways of teaching alphabets in different regions. Pandit Roopram used *geru* (red clay soil) dissolved in water as ink and a pen of reed for teaching alphabets to the students. On the day of initiation, Roopramji dipped the pen in *geru* solution and gave it to Shriram and, holding his hand, wrote '*ga*' in Hindi on the *patti* and spelt it. Shriram immediately imitated his teacher and before he could utter any words to introduce the alphabet, Shriram said "*Ga* for *Gayatri*" The teacher was dumbfounded because he never imagined that a child of four years of age could identify and define an alphabet and that too, in his own way.

He typically introduced the letter '*Ga*' with word '*Ganesh*'. He believed that by introducing '*Ga*' for *Ganesh*, it would lead to intellectual blossoming of the child. Ganesh, being the presiding deity of intellect, was considered as a good beginning to the learning process. When Shriram uttered 'Gayatri' without being taught about it, the teacher and all those present there were astounded. Later the teacher asked Shriram about who taught him that '*Ga*' stands for Gayatri. The child replied that nobody had taught him this and that he had just heard it at his home. He also said that his father spoke about Gayatri in the *Bhagavat Katha*. Teacher Roopram and father Roop Kishore were extremely impressed. Both of them caressed the child as a token of their blessings and affection.

In those days, parents felt that it was good to let the child stay with his teacher. More the student stayed with the Guru, more he learnt from him. 15-20 students stayed in Pandit Roopram's school. There were students who came from neighboring villages also. The number of students who came to learn from him was two times more than the number of residential students. At times, even day scholars would end up sleeping at the school premises instead of going home. Guruji used to treat all the students with loving care. One could easily see the discipline exhibited by students in studying, eating, sleeping and sitting. But this was not enforced on them. This was evoked in the hearts of students with love and affection. For example, Guruji would personally wake up the students who slept in his house. It is normal for children to sleep till late hours in the morning even though they may not be tired. It gives them lot of pleasure to laze in the bed. In such situations, the teacher himself would cajole them out of the bed and offer them morning refreshments and make them sit for study after giving them a bath.

Gayatri is Brahman's *Kamadhenu*

Shriram used to sleep in his own house. He would reach school by seven in the morning and study in school till late in the evening. This routine continued for 5-6 years and after that he went on his tour to Kashi with his father. It had been decided during the inaugural ceremony of Kashi Hindu Vishwavidyalaya, Sri Malaviyaji would himself invest Shriram with the sacred thread. With this plan in mind, Shriram's father had not conducted his "Thread ceremony" even at the age of 8. On reaching Kashi, Shriram was invested with sacred thread in a simple ceremony held at Malaviyaji's residence. During the *samskar* ceremony, Malaviyaji taught him – "Gayatri is the deity of all the Vedas and is the embodiment of Brahma –the Supreme Spirit" These words kept echoing in the ears of Shriram on his way back from Kashi. For a boy of 10-12 years, these teachings were occult in nature and not easily comprehensible. When comprehended a few years later, they defined and determined the direction for the entire life.

Based on his level of understanding, Shriram asked various questions from his father about what Malaviyaji taught him: "Why is Gayatri called as a Brahman's *Kamadhenu*? Who is a Brahman? Who can realize Gayatri? If a Brahman can realize Gayatri, what is the reason for the sad state of affairs of this caste? Who cursed Gayatri? How could one revoke the curse?" All such questions were answered during the return journey itself. Later Gurudev (Shriram) wrote about the answers that he received from his father. They give a clear explanation about the secret of Gayatri *Sadhana*. Continuing the story, after the *Yagyopaveet Samskar*, Shriram began to do *Gayatri Jap* at dawn and dusk. It was lodged firmly in his mind that not doing *sandhyavandan* violated *Yagyopaveet* and led to the downfall of the person; also that the new life that was bestowed during *Yagyopaveet* would come to a standstill and he would lose the privilege of calling himself a *Dwij* (Twice-born).

After returning from Varanasi, Shriram selected a room in his residential mansion for doing *japa* and *dhyan*. He used to go into the open area for doing *sandhyavandan*. The venue for that was either the terrace of his house or the holy shrine of Shiva on the outskirts of the village. He also used to do *sandhyavandan* beneath a banyan tree in their field. His father felt extremely happy on seeing his son engrossed in *jap* and *dhyan*. He used to say that Shriram would prove himself to be a true Brahman and will make his family and all *upasaks* (worshippers) of Gayatri proud of him. Whenever his father uttered the word 'Brahman', he never meant someone born in that caste. In plain words it meant one whose actions were pure. Brahman is one who fosters an intense aspiration to realize the Brahma (The Supreme Spirit).

He used to wake up at five in the morning and sit for *sandhyavandan* after completing his morning chores. His *Gayatri Japa, Sandhyavandan* and meditation on the golden rays of the *Savita* would continue until the Eastern horizon was lit with the golden rays of the Sun. His morning rituals would conclude with the following words – *Anena sandhyopasanena karmana sri parameswarah preeyataam na mama. Om tat sat Brahmarpanamastu.* With these words young Shriram would offer the fruits of his *japa* and *dhyana* to the Lord and return home. He would get ready and reach his classroom by 7.00 AM. In addition to regular studies, they were also imbued with noble character and conduct. Evening *sandhyavandan* would begin just before sunset. By the time stars peeped out of the evening skies, Shriram would finish his prayers. This routine continued for 4-5 years.

Scriptures proclaim that those who do regular *Gayatri Japa* in the prescribed manner, with unwavering faith, will scale great spiritual heights. It has been said that Gayatri is *Kamadhenu*; hence it should be taken as the truth and followed in thought, word and deed. Faith in scriptures, teacher and *sadhana* safely leads the seeker on the path of spiritual attainment.

The Game of *Sadhana*

Young Shriram used to practice meditation during the day, in addition to his regular *sandhyavandan* at dawn and dusk. Meditation was his favorite play at school. Whenever there was a short break from class-work, he would sit for *japa* and meditation while other students went to play. Some of his friends showed an inclination for his unique play. These 3-4 children designed a new game and named it '*Sadhana*'. In this game, the player sits with closed eyes. He is asked to visualize the resplendent sun amidst the eyebrows. It is not sure how many students understood this game; nevertheless they sat quietly and replied that they were enjoying the game. In the next phase of the game there would be discussions about Gayatri, Himalayas, Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati, sages and other great people. There would be no arguments during these discussions. They would speak about 8-10 sentences and continue the game for half an hour or so and then disperse. After a few days, Shriram began to go to a nearby forest along with 3-4 friends. The game used to be conducted there under the shade of a huge tree.

One day, Shriram went to the forest alone and came back in the afternoon. The teacher assumed that he must have gone home owing to some work while Shriram's family thought that he was at school. Hence no one went in search of him. Those friends who had developed a liking for his '*sadhana*' game began to search for him. When Shriram appeared in the afternoon, they questioned him as to where he had been. Shriram replied that he had found a solitary cave in the forest and that they could meditate undisturbed in that cave. The next day, he went to the cave along with his friends. His friends had somehow managed to accompany him upto the entrance to the cave, but no one had the courage to enter it. They were afraid and stayed out while Shriram entered it. His friends were in a dilemma. They neither had the courage to go inside nor to go back to school. They waited for their leader to come back and stood outside the cave.

Shriram came out after an hour and his friends told him that they would not join in his game thenceforth. Shriram was not affected by his friends' refusal. He continued to mediate in the cave whenever he found time from school-work. When he began to frequently miss his classes, the teacher questioned the students about the absence of Shriram. One of the boys named Gopaldas told the whole story. Then the teacher asked him to go and tell these things to Shriram's parents. In this way Taiji got to know about his meditation sessions in the cave. She summoned Shriram and scolded him. She told that there were wild animals in the jungle who would not spare him. Shriram gave his silent consent that he would never again go to the cave. His mother immediately hugged him and pulled him close to her heart.

After this, there was not a single incident in which he missed his classes unless he was sick. He used to go to school on time and when he could not go to school, a message would be sent to the teacher that Shriram would be unable to attend the classes that day. One day neither the notice came nor Shriram came to the school. Pandit Roop Ram thought that they might have forgotten to send the message for some reason and hence did not pay much attention to Shriram's absence.

That same evening, he got a message from Shriram's house that he had not yet reached home.

Then it dawned on the teacher that the student left home for school and got diverted elsewhere. First hunch was that he must have gone to the cave in the forest. Taiji told that she had asked him to stop going there and hence that was out of question. In spite of this some people went in search of him there. It was the eighth or ninth day after full-moon and hence the path could easily be seen in the dim light of the Moon. Even then, the search-party arranged for torches and went out looking for Shriram.

Himalayas is My Abode

Panditji (Shriram's father) called out from the entrance of the cave. There was no response from inside. The voice only echoed back to him. It was then decided to search for him inside the cave with torch light. The twelve meter long zigzag cave was thoroughly searched. There was no trace of Shriram. Everyone returned home dejected. At home, Taiji was in a pathetic state due to continuous crying. The search for Shriram continued. The next morning, Taiji's uncle Sri Rukmani Prasad, came to meet Taiji. In fact, he had arrived at Aanwlakheda the previous night itself but did not come straight to her house because, as per the tradition, it was not advisable to stay overnight in a daughter or niece's place or accept food and water at her place. Hence, he had spent the night in a temple at the outskirts of the village.

The moment he reached his niece's place, he saw an atmosphere of grief and lamentation because Shriram was missing since the previous day. Rukmani Prasad recalled that he had met a 10-12 year old boy on his way. He was surprised to see a boy traveling alone on a solitary road and asked where he was going. The boy replied very naturally that he was going to the Himalayas. Rukmani Prasad laughed at the naughty lad on hearing this answer. He let out a laugh because Himalaya was very far away. Local people only knew of Govardhan Parvat which was also more than 40 miles away. On reaching Aanwalkheda, he realized that the boy was none other than his niece's son.

On hearing these words, Panditji immediately got ready to search for Shriram. Rukmani Prasad led them upto the place where he had met Shriram the previous day. It was obvious that the boy would not be there and would have at least moved 3-4 miles ahead. They all followed the same road and went for a few miles. They found Shriram sitting in meditation in a temple of Lord Shiva near a lake. The father was greatly relieved on seeing him safe and waited for the boy to complete his meditation. The moment he got up, his father embraced him tightly and asked, "Is this an age for you to go to the Himalayas? Why did you come away without informing us? Is it fair on your part to hurt your parents?" Asking innumerable such questions, tears rolled down from the eyes of Pt. Roop Kishoreji.

Confronting Taiji was a tougher task. Taiji had slept off after crying in despair. On seeing her son, she again began to cry loudly. Her crying encapsulated all that had happened at the birth of Shriram – the coming of *Sadhus* and *Sanyasis* to see him, the dreams that she had, the predictions about Shriram, his interest in regular worship etc. She cursed all those who were responsible for motivating Shriram on the path of penance and *sadhana*. The son tried to understand his mother's feelings and asked her not to speak ill of *Sadhus* and her Lord Dwarakadhish (Krishna). He asked her to scold him instead as he was the cause for her distress. The moment Shriram held himself responsible for her pain, Taiji's wailing stopped. She said that if he genuinely accepted that he was responsible for her suffering, he should give her a solemn pledge. Ṣhriram waited with bated breath to listen to the latter part of her bidding. She said, "You will never think of becoming a *Sadhu* or *Sanyasi* and leave me. You might be the soul of Himalaya, but so long as I am alive, you are just Shriram. Never plan to settle in Himalaya till I am alive. After I am gone, you may live anywhere." Taiji was phrasing each sentence with considerable care and thought. Shriram also attentively listened to each word and said, "Yes Mother, I will always be with you. I will not even leave this region of Vrij since I know how much you like this place of Lord Krishna." On hearing these words of assurance, Taiji calmed down, because she was sure that Shriram always kept his word and hence would adhere to his promise. That day was celebrated like a festival in their home. The mother was reassured that her loving son would never go away from her for good. It was different if he had to leave her and go somewhere else for his work or something else. Taiji's intention was to let Shriram stay in the proximity of her and her household. And Shriram had given his word to fulfill her wish.

After this incident, his daily education and *sadhana* continued as before. His father began to pay close attention to him. He was to complete his primary education in 4-6 months. As a measure of caution it was decided that the boy would not be sent out of the village for secondary education. His father was a scholar of *Bhagavat Mahapuran*. He first taught his son '*Laghu Siddhant Kaumudi*' and later '*Madhya*' and '*Siddhant Kaumudi*'. After completing his primary school education, he found more time for these classical Sanskrit studies. After completing the studies of *Bhagavat, Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, he began to study other ancient scriptures at a fast pace. His father had realized that he did not have many years to live and hence had told his son to solely concentrate on learning *Sanatan Vedic* lore for the next two years. He probably wanted to teach *Bhagavat* to his son as an heirloom. The father might have thought that his son will also do *katha* of *Bhagavat*. If there was any other reason behind teaching him *Bhagavat*, one can only speculate about it.

Dissemination of Knowledge

After having learnt to read and write in Pt. Roop Ram's school, there arose a tendency in Shriram to share this knowledge. Just as he taught other children about *Jap* and *Dhyan* after he got initiated by Malaviyaji, he now wanted to teach others to read and write. After learning *Shastras* and Sanskrit from his father, there was some time that could be spared. In that spare time, he went to the *Chaupal* of the village where people generally assembled daily. Even if there were 3-4 people, Shriram would ask them to read something. Whoever could manage to read would read while others would sit quietly. When Shriram said that they should learn to read if they did not know, a typical reply would be – 'What is the use of learning to read now? We are old and have just a few years to live and will prefer to remain uneducated'.

Initially, when he heard such a hopeless reply, he did not say anything to them. But when everyone began to give the same answer, one day Shriram said to them that in the cave where he meditated, there was a hidden treasure. On hearing about the treasure, everyone became wide-eyed. Since they all knew about Shriram's spiritual bent of mind and *sadhana*, nobody suspected his words or made fun of it. They all asked about what should be done to find and dig out the treasure. Then Shriram replied, "What will you do with that treasure? You are all old and whatever little life is left can be spent as it is."

The elderly men did not understand what Shriram was driving at and said, "No, a treasure can be utilized at any age." Shriram replied that to obtain that treasure, they should first attain the wealth of knowledge which would in turn teach them about the procedure to find the treasure. After listening to this, some old men got ready to learn. It is said that when the cave was searched, some gold ornaments were actually found beneath the rock. These ornaments could have been the loot of a dacoit by name Dhandhu or a mere coincidence. In the process of his teaching, Shriram had definitely taught those old men some *Bhajans* and verses of *Ramayana*.

Serving Chhapko

Aanwalkheda had its share of good and bad. The most predominant evil was untouchability. It was a strange and incomprehensible situation in which people in the higher strata did not really hate those who were backward. They even took care of them but from a distance. They were invited for weddings but were not allowed to mix in their group. They were seated separately, served food in a different batch etc. Though there was no feeling of hatred, these interactions from a distance were the result of some long-practiced distorted tradition. Life became worse when one of the lowly placed fell sick.

This is an incident that took place in 1923. There were few huts at the outskirts of Aanwalkheda where sweepers and people of Dom community lived. Nobody from upper or middle castes would even glance at these houses. A Dalit woman Chhapko used to come to Panditji's mansion to do cleaning jobs. Elders called her by name while children called her *Chachi* (aunt) or *Amma* (mother). Chhapko regularly worked in the houses of the higher castes and did not shirk from work even during her illness. Even if she did not come for a day or two, people complained and threatened that she would be removed from work. It was due to this fear that Chhapko and people from her community never missed coming to work even during an illness. If someone fell ill, somebody else was sent as a replacement.

Nobody had seen Chhapko falling sick. Never did she complain about an ailment, not even a simple headache. One day Chhapko did not report at work. They waited for her till the evening but in vain. She did not come to work even the next day. They learnt that she did not come to work in any of their neighboring houses too. 4-5 days passed like this. There was no one in Chhapko's family whom she could send as a replacement. When the family began to discuss about employing someone else in place of Chhapko, it fell in the ears of young Shriram. He felt that Chhapko amma must have fallen sick and that was the reason for her absence. He even told Taiji that they should administer medicine to Chhapko amma. As per the tradition in the village, Taiji replied that she would give medicine if Chhapko came to their home. Shriram argued that Chhapko could come only if she recovered from illness and how could she recover without medicine?

Shriram quietly walked to the place where Chhapko amma lived. He had to cross garbage heaps and dirty drains to reach her residence. He did not have any difficulty in tracing her house from the 4 huts that were there in that locality. He called out from the door step and received no response from inside. He cleared the grass and dirt blocking the door and peeped inside. Chhapko amma was lying almost unconscious on the cot. She opened her eyes on hearing his footsteps and tried to sit on the cot but could not manage to do it.

While trying to sit, she asked Shriram why he had come there. She told him that he would receive a thrashing when his family came to know of this. Shriram did not listen to her and placed his hand on her forehead. Her body was hot with fever. He remembered that his family members checked the palm and tongue if anyone had fever. He too did the same. There was a wound on her palm. Putrefying pus was oozing out of the wound. He thought that the wound might have become septic which had resulted in high temperature.

He assured Chhapko amma not to worry and said that he would come back with medicines. He ran out before she could say anything in reply. He first got her a drink of water and then managed to get medicines and bandage-related material. He came back in a few minutes and bandaged her hand with a clean cloth and then made her take the medicine so that fever could be brought under control. Chhapko amma's eyes were filled with tears of gratitude. More than the medicine, his compassion and service worked a miracle. She began to fall asleep. Shriram left the place with a promise to come back.

He was lost in thought about what was to be done the next day to alleviate the suffering of Chhapko amma when he reached the doorstep of his house. His uncle was waiting at the door with a pot of sanctified water. He sprinkled the water on Shriram thrice and asked him to take bath outside before entering the house. A pair of clothes was already kept ready for him. Shriram entered the house after the cleansing process was complete. He did not ask any questions. He simply said that they should arrange for more sanctified water and another set of clothes since he had plans to visit Chhapko amma for many days to come. His family members who expected an elaborate apology or an explanation for his action were taken aback by his behavior. Shriram again emphasized his point that he would go to Chhapko amma's residence daily until her wounds were healed. There was no trace of defiance or sarcasm in his voice but a firm determination. He was reprimanded severely for this reply and was asked to stay without food that day.

Undaunted by punishment or rebuke, Shriram went to serve Chhapko amma with an empty stomach the next day. He changed her bandage, administered medicine and returned home. He did not enter the house but was standing outside. Taiji saw him. In her mind, she was feeling very bad about punishing him. But she did not have the courage to revolt against the traditions of those times.

Taiji served food to Shriram in vessels made of clay as part of atonement for serving an untouchable. Shriram took a couple of rotis and some lentils and proceeded towards Chhapko's house. He woke up Chhapko and fed her the food that he brought from home. Both Shriram and Chhapko were filled with happiness when he fed her with his own hands. Shriram returned home after putting her to sleep. A separate room was assigned to him and he sat there to have his food. He did not step out of his room for the rest of the day since there was no use in coming out. The news of Shriram serving an untouchable had spread in the entire village. Hence no one was supposed to touch or interact with him. Villagers had given strict instructions to their children that they were not to play with Shriram.

After 7-8 days of regular medication, Chhapko's wound was healed. Temperature was also normal. She began to cook food herself. Shriram stopped visiting her. By this time, his father completed a *Bhagavat Katha* in Alwar and returned home. The moment he reached his doorstep, he saw Shriram staying in the outhouse and lying down on a mat. He immediately asked about what had happened. His younger brother Devlal narrated the entire sequence of events. He expected that his elder brother would be pleased with the immaculate atonement procedure being followed with respect to Shriram. Till date, nobody had gone to an untouchable's house and violated the custom. So, there was never an occasion to take decisions on what should be done in the case of a violation. The moment this opportunity emerged, Devlal imposed the strictest of rules on his nephew. He expected that he would be praised for his staunch observance of the atonement procedure.

Atonement or Reward

The reverse of what was expected happened. Panditji asked, 'What have you done Devlal? It is against the *Dharma* if someone in the *Bhagavat* family is punished for serving another person.' He patted Shriram's back and praised his son for having rightly understood and followed the *Dharma* of *Bhagavat*. By this time, people from the neighboring houses had also gathered. They had come to offer their salutations to Panditji but stayed back when they saw Devlal being admonished. Panditji was telling about Saint Eknath who offered the sacred water of Ganga to a thirsty donkey instead of carrying it for offering to Lord Shiva at Rameswaram. He said that the Lord appreciated Eknath's gesture and accepted the water in the form of *Abhisheka*. Life was a precious boon of the Almighty. There was no deed more sacred than protecting a life.

Panditji paused for a while and again said to Devlal that he was not totally at fault. The outmoded traditions practiced by the society were themselves wrong. He said that this would not continue for a long time and things would slowly change for the better. Then he turned to his son and said, "Think that you too have completed a *Purashcharan* and be happy."

Father's support filled Shriram's heart with new enthusiasm. He stepped out of the outhouse and went straight to Chhapko's house and called her. She was wondering why this Brahmin lad had come again after having left in the morning with a word that he would not come back. Chhapko was tormented by the wrath of villagers. All these days, she was comfortably being served by Shriram and she had no knowledge of villagers' reaction towards Shriram. She knew that she would know about it all once she entered the village. As she was thinking thus, her train of thoughts was interrupted by Shriram's voice. The first thought that crossed her mind was that the villagers would have come to announce their decision. Before she could think any further Shriram entered the hut and came inside. His voice was filled with enthusiasm and his face glowed with joy, as though he had achieved a big success.

She began saying, "Dear Brahmin Devata! Please do not come here any more. I have recovered and am doing fine. If others see you coming here, I will not even be allowed to enter the village." Chhapko did not notice how joyous Shriram was or even if she had noticed, she preferred not to pay attention to it. The Brahmin boy understood her predicament and said, "Amma, do not worry anymore. My father has waived off whatever atonement my uncle had imposed. My father has also given his blessings that I did a noble deed by serving you."

Chhapko could not believe her ears. Shriram repeated that he was telling the truth. After listening to this, Chhapko's face shone with happiness and peace. In an effort to express her emotions, she raised both her hands as though blessing him. Shriram then told her not to worry about anything and proceeded towards his house.

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Savour the Holy Land of the Lord

It was the first or the second month of 1924 when Shriram accompanied his father to the house of his maternal grandfather to participate in the *Bhagavat* - Week arranged there. The discourse on *Bhagavat* was to be given by another scholar. Pt. Roop Kishore was invited, as he was the son-in-law. Taiji had reached there earlier. Father and son left one day before the ceremony and reached there on time. On the way, the son raised a few philosophical questions that had already crossed his mind during the incident with Chhapko Amma. One of the questions was - 'You give discourses on *Bhagavat* and based on this, you could have proved that serving Chhapko Amma was the right thing to do; yet during the discussion, you explained the matter to Kalyan Pandit on the basis of Gayatri. Why did you choose Gayatri?'

The father explained that he chose Gayatri because *Bhagavat* was nothing but a detailed commentary on Gayatri; not just *Bhagavat* but all *shastras* were the detailed explanations of Gayatri and that Gayatri was the seed from which all the scriptures, including Vedas, had sprouted. Sriram listened and asked again 'I too have listened to your discourses, but never has the glory of Gayatri been described like this anywhere in that *Purana*'. The reply of his father gave direction to Sriram's thought. Panditji said, "You have to investigate that glory. For now, just learn the scriptural aspect of *Bhagavat*. It begins with Gayatri mantra. The very first *shloka* of *Bhagavat Purana* is like a commentary on Gayatri mantra. It is resplendent with many words and meanings related to Gayatri."

The meaning of the *shloka* is – "That, in which the entire universe is created, maintained and dissolved; that, in which, space and other matter is present and also absent; one who is omniscient; one who is omnipotent and is in the form of supreme effulgence; who by mere resolve explained Vedas to Lord Brahma; one who enchants great and learned scholars; by whose influence this illusory universe also appears as a reality; to that effulgent form of light who creates illusion but is beyond it, we offer our prayer."

On narrating the opening sloka, the father said that the phrase '*Janmadyasya yatah*' implies the word '*Savituh*'. Similarly, '*svarat*' implies '*devasya*'; '*Dhamna svena sada nirasta kuhakam*' implies '*Varenya bharga*' and '*Tene brahmahruda cha adikavyaye*' talks about the all-pervading power inherent in Gayatri that controls all three worlds. '*Satyam param dhimahi*' expresses the fundamental inspiration behind Gayatri mantra. Not only that, the *Bhagvat Shastra* also concludes with '*Satyam param dhimahi*'. The 19th *shloka* of the 13th chapter of 12th canto of *Bhagavat* speaks of imbibing into ourselves the truth of the Lord Almighty who is purity personified and beyond all illusions. In this way, both in terms of words and meanings, *Srimad Bhagavat* is nothing but a detailed commentary of Gayatri.

Panditji further explained that according to *Matsya* and *Vaman Puranas* also, the presiding deity of *Bhagavat* is Gayatri. The *Shastra* begins with Gayatri and hence it is called *Bhagava*t. The entire journey till the house of the maternal grandfather was spent in this discussion that - Gayatri represents the knowledge of all *Shastras*; is the basis of the most important scripture of the era - the *Bhagavat* which is also the basis of *Sanatan Dharma*. He further explained that Valmiki wrote *Ram Katha* comprising of 24000 *shlokas* as an exposition of the 24 letters of Gayatri. If one looks into *Ramayan*, the first *shloka* in every thousand *shlokas* begins with one of the letters in Gayatri mantra.

Panditji continued – "Few hundred years ago, Goswami Tulsidas wanted to narrate *Ram katha* as folklore. He wanted to explain the nature of *sanatan dharma* in the language of the masses and hence sought the help of *Valmiki Ramayan* and *Bhagavat*. From *Valmiki Ramayan*, he picked the story of *Ram- Avatar* and from *Bhagavat*, devotion. He synthesized them both and composed '*Ramcharit Manas*'. Do you know how Goswamiji received the inspiration to write the book? Baba Venimadhav has said in '*Gunsayi Charit*' that one day when Tulsidasji had just completed *Sandhya Gayatri*, Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati appeared before him and directed him to write *Ramcharit Manas*. In *Samvat* 1631, on the day of Ramnavami, after the morning *Sandhya Vandan*, Goswamiji began the composition of '*Ramcharit Manas*' The *sadhak* may choose any deity as his favorite, but he has to begin with the *japa* of Gayatri."

In the Playground of Lord Sri Krishna

After pausing for a while, Panditji said, "Think this way - 'Gayatri Mantra' is the key and all the *sadhanas* are the treasure houses. Without this key, it is not possible to acquire the wealth of devotion, knowledge and yoga." During the course of *Saptah Parayana*, Panditji unraveled many aspects of Gayatri in addition to *Bhagavat* and religion. Shriram was extremely interested in those discussions. On the concluding day of the *Katha*, both father and son began to make preparations to return home. Taiji also made up her mind to leave because it would spare the trouble of someone escorting her back home later. When it was decided that they would leave together, then Taiji expressed her desire to visit Mathura and behold Dwarakadhish (Sri Krishna). Panditji began to calculate the impact on his schedule in the light of Taiji's suggestion and was lost in thought. On seeing this, Taiji added weight to the proposal by saying that Shriram had not visited Mathura and that since he was with them, they could all go and have the *Darshan* of Sri Krishna and Yamunaji. Panditji smiled at the request of Taiji and agreed to return to Aanwalkheda via Mathura. The change in programme would take two extra days.

The land of Vraj lacked dense and shade-giving trees. Hence, in the initial days, travelers faced difficulties in walking or riding through the stretch of sand; but when the family of Panditji visited the place, it was the autumn season and the climate was cool. They did not face any inconvenience in walking from Sahpau to Mathura. They were just 2.5 kilometers from Mathura when they saw a temple on a hillock. They could hear bells ringing which implied that there were people visiting the temple.

Shriram asked his father, 'Whose temple is this?' Since it was on the outskirts of the city, Panditji guessed that it must be the temple of *Gram Devta* (deity of the village). It was common to have such temples on the outskirts of a town or village. Shriram expressed his desire to go to the temple. They climbed the hillock. The idol of Govindji was installed in the temple. After having the *darshan* of the Lord, they sat down to relax for a while. Within a few minutes, the silence of the temple was broken by a booming voice chanting '*Jai Jai Radhe*' Panditji saw a mendicant approaching them. The person with a long beard and ruffled hair could have been about 60-65 years old.

Panditji offered his salutations to the *sanyasi*. In reply, the *Sadhu* enquired if they had any food left. Taiji opened her food packet and took out 4 *Puris* and pickles and extended it towards Panditji. Panditji offered the food respectfully to the *sadhu* who in turn blessed them and left the place. Shriram, who was seated near his mother, was observing all this closely. On seeing the *sadhu* walk away, Shriram shouted 'Babaji, have you seen God?' The *sadhu* stopped in his tracks and replied - 'No, but I wish to see Him. It is to realize Him that I am wandering in His land.'

Stop Wandering

After giving his reply, the *sadhu* looked at Shriram lovingly. Shriram said 'Babaji, stop roaming from one place to another. Savour the holy land of the Lord and you will get Him here.' Though it was a simple suggestion, it somehow touched the heart of the *sadhu*. Whatever meaning he attributed to the word 'savour', he lay down and rolled in the soil in front of Lord Govind's temple. The touch of the soil rejuvenated and thrilled his whole being. In his reverie, he went on saying, 'You have shown me the path, my child. My search is over. The Lord had always been here but I had shut my eyes to Him.' Saying this, the *sadhu* wanted to prostrate in front of the boy; but before he could do so, Shriram ran off. Both Taiji and Panditji were listening to the conversation between their son and the *sadhu*. When Shriram began to run, they asked him to stop, joined him and continued their journey to Dwarakadhish temple.

Nobody spoke anything on the way. After they had the *darshan* of Dwarakadhish, Taiji expressed her reaction to the incident on the hillock temple and said 'The Lord Himself spoke through my child. What is the need for anyone to wander way-lost in His land? Anyone who reaches here is liberated.'

After reaching Mathura, Taiji had the *darshan* of Dwarakadhish. Shriram asked his father several questions about the temple and Mathura. The questions were full of curiosity and inquisitiveness. Dwarakadhish temple was just around 200 years old. The majestic idol of Lord Sri Krishna adorns the sanctum sanctorum of the temple that was built in 1814. This dark coloured idol is worshipped in accordance with the *Vallabh Sampradaya* tradition. After seeing the temple, the entire family went to visit Katra Keshavdev. It is believed that Sri Krishna was born here. Now one can see an imposing temple and *Bhagavat Bhavan* there, but when Shriram visited the place with his family, there was only an ordinary temple.

After leaving Katra Keshadev, the family reached Vishram Ghat. It is believed that from Katra Keshavdev, where the palace of Kansa stood, Lord Krishna, after killing Kansa, had gone to the banks of the Yamuna. He and his elder brother Balram had spent sometime on the banks of the Yamuna. It is believed that whatever fatigue the Lord felt while fighting with Kansa and his cohorts was alleviated here. That is the reason why the *ghat* is named Vishram Ghat (river bank for relaxation). Shriram asked 'Father! Have we also come here to remove the tiredness of visiting Keshavdev temple? This place is Vishram Ghat for us too.' The father could not help but smile at his son's naughty comment.

Agony at Vishram Ghat

The subtle vibrations permeating Mathura and Brindavan are brimming with devotion to Lord Krishna even today. A sensitive and receptive mind is immediately immersed in these soul-soothing vibrations. However the travelers and pilgrims face lot of difficulties due to *purohits* and *pandas*. The situation today is slightly better than what it was those days. The *pandas* were greedy and malicious which spoiled the reputation of those great pilgrimage places. Shriram's father knew about these people quite well and hence their family did not face any difficulty. But they saw other fellow pilgrims being troubled by the *pandas*. A person who was surrounded by the *pandas* was shouting that they were bothered about nothing but the payment that they would receive and did not possess even an iota of devotion or purity. He was asking them as to why they didn't take up any other job. On hearing the comment, a *panda* replied, 'What job do you think we should take up?' The pilgrim replied that they could take up any job. The *panda* made fun of the suggestion and in a malicious tone said "One task we can certainly do. If you die, we can throw you into river Yamuna. Then whatever belongings you have will become our hard-earned wages." The other *pandas* began to laugh on hearing the reply. Shriram looked at his father in bewilderment. Panditji held the hand of his son and signaled him to move on. Shriram asked as to why no one was helping the pilgrim who was being harassed. His father said – "The *pandas* outnumber us. If anyone goes against that *panda*, all the other *pandas* will get united and it will be difficult to fight against them." Shriram in his boyhood innocence asked 'Is this the land of Lord Krishna or Kansa?'

Taiji said – "The land is certainly that of the Lord but the influence of Kansa has always remained here". Shriram then asked again 'Will these atrocities continue like this? Will there be no improvement in the situation?" The father reassured him saying "It is not so. The circumstances do not remain the same for long. This will definitely change." They were taking a turn towards Sati Tower of Vishram Ghat and Panditji pointed towards a small lane and said that there used to live a *sanyasi* 50-60 years ago. He was a great scholar of Vedic texts. He had seen this pitiful state of Mathura. There were many other bad practices in *dharma* against which the *sanyasi* wanted to revolt and fight; but he could not do much as he was blind.

Panditji had begun to narrate the tale of Swami Virajananda, the Guru of Swami Dayanand Saraswati. One day, a celibate from Gujarat came to Swami Virajananda. The celibate said that he wanted to study all the *Vedas* and *Shastras* so that he could know the ultimate truth. The *sanyasi* asked what the student could give as *Guru Dakshina*. The celibate replied that he would give anything that the *Guru* wanted. The *sanyasi* replied – "Destroy the hypocrisy, revolt against the atrocities being committed in the name of righteousness (*dharma*) and uproot all evil practices." The disciple agreed to give this *Guru Dakshina*. He stayed with the Guru and acquired all the Vedic knowledge. After completing his studies, the disciple traveled around the entire country. He awakened people and made them aware of all the evil practices being indulged in the name of *dharma*. He explained to the people the true nature of *dharma*. Shriram expressed his curiosity and asked how a single person could achieve all that. The father replied – "If one has courage and determination, no task is too tough to accomplish"

Raising the Anti-Hypocrisy Banner

After completing Vedic studies under his Guru, Swami Dayanand set out for Haridwar to attend the Kumbh Parva there. During his halts on the way, he used to hold discussions with small groups of people about the Vedic Dharma, explaining to them the rationale behind the rituals and traditions and encourage people to follow them. The motive behind going to Kumbh was to meet thousands of people gathered there. After reaching Haridwar, Swamiji put up a small tent and hoisted a flag there on, which read '*Pakhand Khandini Pataka*' (Anti-hypocrisy Banner). The banner drew instant attraction of a lot of people. Swamiji stood outside the tent and spoke about misconceptions related to idol worship, *shraddh*, *avatars, puranas*, rituals etc. He also began to speak about the discrimination based on caste, untouchability, child marriages, sati system, evils of the prevalent marriage system, blind customs, etc. There was extraordinary force in his words and his arguments were sound. He received applause as well as opposition.

Swamiji laid the foundation of an organization called 'Arya Samaj' with the help of supporters he found during the Kumbh and thereafter. He traveled far and wide throughout his life. He met with people in all social strata from kings to scholars. Panditji also told Shriram that many people conspired against Swamiji. His death was also a result of a conspiracy. Some people in Jodhpur lured his cook to kill Swamiji by poisoning his food. As behoves a true saint, before his death he ensured that the cook escaped. He feared that if the people got to know about the treacherous act, they would not leave the cook alive. Shriram was listening to this narration with rapt attention. But he did not express any kind of reaction.

Their return journey was spent in discussing about the malpractices of the *Pandas* in Mathura. This trip, in the company of his father, gave Shriram an insight into Indian philosophy and culture. Although the mission for which destiny had chosen him did not require any external help or assistance, still even a born realized soul like Shukadev had to listen to *Bhagavat Katha* from his father Vedavyasa.

The palatial haveli in which Shriram lived housed the families of three uncles and his brothers and sisters. It was a joint family of about 20 to 25 people. The people from the in-laws of the uncles also used to visit them on a regular basis. There was also a constant flow of other relatives to the house. The atmosphere was always full of fun and frolic. Whenever his father was at home, the living room echoed with spiritual discussions in which people from neighbouring villages also participated. After returning from Sahpau's *Bhagavat*-Week, one day his father experienced pain in the chest. He was seated comfortably and talking to visitors when all of a sudden, he felt piercing pain in the chest. He uttered the mantra '*Namah Bhagavate Vasudevaya*' and fell down unconscious. The entire household went into a chaos. Worry and grief replaced the cheerful atmosphere. This incident occurred during the day and medical help was available instantly. Panditji regained consciousness in a little while and in 3 to 4 days he began to look normal. Though Panditji recovered, doctors advised him to be careful. They said that he was suffering from heart disease and hence precaution was a must. He should henceforth abstain from travel, do less work and reduce meeting people. Panditji listened to their advice. He did reduce his workload and interaction with people. He began to spend more time in worship, instead. His participation in *Bhagavat Katha* was also reduced.

Shriram was observing closely the changes that came in his father after his illness. He had seen many people fall ill. He had seen them recover from their illness and lead a completely normal life. They had almost resumed their regular routine life within a matter of a few days.

Drastic Change in the Attitude of Father

Sriram's father was deeply *satvik* and inward-drawn by nature. Even then he underwent a very unique transformation after the illness. It felt as if he was preparing to wind up all his activities. Before undertaking a journey, one busies oneself in packing up all things in a short time. The behaviour and urgency of his father was also something similar. During those days, his father spent a great deal of his time in marrying off his children, fulfilling the needs of his brothers and sisters, and in satisfying the curiosity of the seekers who came to him.

It was *Samvat* 1980 (AD 1923) and the beginning of the month of *Ashada*. One day, his father called Shriram and said – 'Sit with me for at least two hours daily for 7 days and listen attentively to what I say' The ritual of '*Kshaur karma*' (shaving the head) was done a day before he was to start sitting with his father. He asked Shriram to have one meal per day and take fruits once during this seven-day period. It was also arranged for both of them to sleep on the floor.

From the next morning, his father began to narrate *Bhagavat Katha*. This was supposed to be a training camp for Shriram alone and others were not invited. He began to explain the story and philosophy parts of *Bhagavat* such that the syllabus for the day was completed in two hours. His father must have been very well aware of his objective of teaching *Bhagavat* to his son. But he did not disclose it even to Shriram.

Possibly, the intention might have been to introduce the fundamental principles and truths of life as taught in *Bhagavat*.

What is the fundamental message of *Bhagavat*? It tells us how to adhere to righteousness even under adverse circumstances. It teaches that one should put in his best to progress in life and lead a life of glad surrender to the will of Almighty. *Bhagavat Katha* begins with the advent of *Kaliyug* or the circumstances unfavorable for soul-growth. King Parikshit sets out to overcome the ill-effects of these circumstances. According to *Bhagavat*, *Kaliyug* is synonymous with inauspiciousness and inverted order. When Parikshit restrains *Kali*, he agrees to free Mother Earth from his clutches. But he seeks shelter for himself. Parikshit allows him to stay in four places and later extends it to five places. The first four places where he allows *Kali* to live are – falsehood, lust, attachment and cruelty. On *Kali's* further request, Parikshit allows him to stay where '*Rajas*' is predominant. *Rajas* means greed, pomp and show, arrogance and narrow-mindedness. Wherever such evil tendencies exist, they will experience the ill- effects of *Kali*, namely sorrow and suffering. What should be done to save oneself from sorrow and suffering? There is only one message of *Bhagavat* –'Live a life of self-surrender to the Lord ' All other methods will only complicate the problems further. When Parikshit had only seven days to live owing to the curse of Rishi Shringi, he did not succumb to worry because he was living a life of surrender. Hence he worked out a plan to make the best use of his seven days of life. The situations developed such that all seven days were spent in spiritual discussions. At the end of *Bhagavat Karma*, he welcomed death as a guest and celebrated the occasion like a festival.

The father and son savoured the *Katha* and discussions during the seven days in which both of them spent exclusive time together and, using the *Bhagavat* as the medium, they discussed many spiritual and philosophical topics. They were submerged in the ocean of knowledge, action and devotion. The eleventh canto of *Bhagavat* speaks of pure philosophy. In this canto, Bhagwan Vedavyasa explains and analyses various methods of seeking liberation in a poetically and simple language. Philosophical discussions normally become mysterious and serious. For example, scriptures like *Vedant, Yog, Sankhya, Mimansa,* etc were comprehensible only to highly learned people. In these scriptures, principles of philosophy have been explained like mathematical formulae. The eleventh Canto of Bhagavat explains these philosophical principles in the form of enchanting poetry.

'I offer you to the Lord'

Even during the seven days of *Bhagavat Katha*, the routine of meditation of Shriram in solitude continued. A strange incident occurred on the last day, when the *Bhagavat* narration concluded. The father was telling *Bhagavat* as though one was reading a story or teaching a lesson to one's child. No rules and procedures of '*anushthan*' were followed. Hence there was no *yagya* or any other ritual on the day of *purnahuti* (completion). After listening to the *Katha*, the son asked the father - '*Dakshina* is offered after listening to *Bhagavat*. What shall I present to you?' The father kept looking at the lovely face of his son. Shriram repeated the question. Panditji caught hold of his son's shoulders and enveloped him in embrace and did not answer the question. When the question was asked the third time, the reply came thus-'Offer yourself'. Shriram replied that he already belonged to his father. He said 'If your intention is that I offer myself to the Lord; I am ready for that too. Please conduct the *Sankalpa* to that effect'.

The father made him take water in his hands and made him take *Sankalpa* (resolve). He then said - 'You now belong to the Lord'. After taking the blessing of his father, Shriram went into solitude as usual. After the incident in the cave, he had stopped going to the jungle. Except his mother, nobody knew where he went now. That day, when he went into solitude, hours flew away. He did not return even by dusk. His mother began to worry and asked Panditji as to where he had sent their son. His father was also apprehensive. He remembered the incident in which his son had started to travel to the Himalaya. He asked in a worried tone - 'Hope he has not gone off somewhere.' Taiji suggested that they should first search in the Shiva Temple located in Gouri Bagh. It was possible that he was immersed in devotion there. Gouri Bagh was a small garden about a mile from the village. There were some trees of mango, guava and neem. Silence ruled the place during all the twelve months of the year. People used to visit the temple only on Mondays / full moon days and on the day of *Shivaratri*. Shriram had chosen this place for himself.

In a Deep Meditative Trance

Panditji almost ran to the place mentioned by Taiji. There were two or three people along with him. When they reached there, they saw Shriram deeply in meditation under a tree. Panditji called him but there was no response. Shriram was sitting self-absorbed. He called out three more times but there was no effect. Panditji then tried to shake him up by holding his hands. The moment some pressure was applied, Shriram fell forward. His hands were joined in the posture of prostration. He looked as though he was bending forward and prostrating before someone. Shriram remained in the same posture after rolling forward. Panditji's face was losing its colour in fear. He repeatedly called his son. He tried to shake him and make him get into a sitting position; but Shriram's body refused to cooperate. They smelt something ominous and kept a finger in front of his nostrils to feel the breath, felt the pulse and tried to listen to his heartbeats. There were no signs of life. Before they could reach any conclusion, the father let out a shrill cry, leaving the others dumbfounded.

The shriek broke the meditative *samadhi* of Shriram. He himself got up and before doing anything offered his salutations to his father. This reassured Panditji that his son was safe. He told Shriram that he was terribly afraid about his life. Shriram did not venture to give any immediate reply. After reaching home, father repeated his fear and thanked the Almighty for giving his son back. At that Shriram asked 'Why are you thanking God? You have already handed me over to Him. Bless me so that I shall always do His work'. Taiji was also present there and she was not very happy with the course of events. She said to her husband 'What have you taught Shriram? All this scares me'.

Shriram spoke about that day's experience to his friends after a few days. After having offered himself to the Lord, his being experienced extraordinary peace. When he sat for meditation, it was as though the world receded away from him and he was all alone. He did not have any clear idea of how long he sat for meditation but in that duration, a wonderful discourse happened. Whether that discourse was an inner experience, a dream or some divine vision, he did not reveal. The experience was like a real incident that was taking place. During that experience, he never realized that he was in meditation.

The Vision of Snakebite

Before sitting for meditation, Shriram used to visit the Shiva temple. That day after the *darshan* of the Lord, he sat beneath the mango tree. He had just sat there when he had the following vision (as he told his friends): "I had the *darshan* of Lord Shiva and was climbing down the steps. The seat of meditation was still 24 to 25 steps away. As I was climbing down, my feet fell on a soft object. I saw that he had stepped on a snake. Within seconds, the angry snake raised its hood and bit my lower leg. Before I could understand what was happening, the snake again bit at my calf muscle and beneath the waist."

He had heard that a snake bites only once. When the fellow listener interrupted, Shriram said he was feeling this in trance. Then he continued further – "After the snakebite, my body fell to the ground. I was not aware of the treatment that was given. It appeared as if this was being done to somebody else. As the poison from the snakebite began to spread through my body, I experienced drowsiness. People sitting nearby were sprinkling water on my face. The doctor came and asked for some medicines to be brought. By now, the *mantrik* had also come. He began to beat the metal plate like a drum and chant some incantations. The sound from the plate was very rhythmic. My mind began to get absorbed in that music. The *mantrik* continued to chant incantations. Once the medicines that were ordered by the doctor came in, the potion was prepared. I drank the potion and instead of getting relief, the pain increased further. It felt as though snakes were biting my entire body. I could experience the sharp stinging and burning sensation; and after some time, those parts of the body first became numb and within a few moments the pain became even more intense."

"I did not know when life ebbed away from my body. When I regained consciousness, I saw a *sanyasi* with matted locks dragging my body from the river. My family had thrown my body into the river thinking that I was dead. The body of a person who dies of snakebite is not cremated. Whatever might be the physical reason behind it, the occult belief is that snake symbolizes time. It is believed that when Time has chosen somebody, there remains nothing in his being that can be consigned to ashes. The *sanyasi* pulled my body out of the river and laid it on the bank. The *sanyasi* sat beside the unconscious body and meditated for a while. The gentle presence of the *sanyasi* brought back my senses slowly. He lovingly patted me and said 'Get up and go home. Your parents must be getting worried'."

"On hearing the command of the *sanyasi*, I tried to get up. The other message that came to me was not to come to that place again. I was asked to mediate at home. I very much wanted to know who the great man was but could not do so because of fear. The *sanyasi* probably understood my thoughts and hence replied to the unasked question, 'I am just one of the seekers trying to find the path to liberation from the pangs of this world. Don't mistake me to be a spiritually realized person. I am an ordinary *sanyasi* and nothing more'."

"I mustered courage to express my wish and asked 'Respected sir, will you please guide me?' The *sanyasi* replied, 'No, I am myself a traveler. But the power that guides you is looking after you at all times. It will present itself to you at the appropriate time. Don't ask me when? I can only say that it will be very soon. Be assured of this and do not accept anyone as your Guru in haste.' The *sanyasi* was telling something more but I am not able to recollect anything. The only words I heard last were 'Get up and go'. When my eyes opened, I saw my father crying piteously. I got up and prostrated before him."

His father believed that this incident happened because of narrating *Bhagavat* to Shriram. Many thoughts crossed his disturbed mind. Then he resigned to fate and decided –"Whatever is acceptable to the Lord will happen. God must have decided something specific for Shriram and it will happen. What can anybody do? It is better to believe that everything will be fine at the end." Panditji's mind was at peace for sometime and then again indulged in his son's future. He knew for sure that his son would not go anywhere leaving his parents behind but his mind was filled with infatuation towards his son. This '*Moha*' (attachment) is a strange emotion that does not allow the mind to focus on one thing.

Panditji decided that very moment that he would not narrate *Bhagavat Katha* to his son anymore; and would not tell him about *sanyasis* and renunciation; he would also not leave Shriram in the company of such people. After this decision, Panditji decided to stop narration of *Bhagavat Shastra*. Whenever a preceptor decides to stop preaching, then he arranges a *purnahuti*. This tradition has become almost extinct today but all those who have been initiated by a Guru to narrate *Bhagavat* still follow the tradition of conducting *purnahuti* when they finally decide to stop narration. A person renounces preaching *Bhagavat Katha* when either his body becomes weak with old age or when he becomes a *parivrajak sanyasi* (an ascetic) or when he does not find organizers who have enough resources to arrange for such programs.

Panditji decided to renounce the *Pothi* (book) of *Bhagavat* when he perceived that his lineage was seeing an untimely *sanyas*. For this purpose, he invited twenty one Brahmins and arranged *Yagya* and installed the *Bhagavat Shastra* in the temple of Vasudeva as *Purnahuti*. The day *Bhagavat Shastra* was installed and Panditji submitted to the Lord that he was taking rest from offering discourses on the scripture, his voice also took rest. Panditji could not speak anymore. People extolled that Panditji's voice was only for speaking about the Lord and not for mundane things and that was the reason his voice also went away after he renounced the scripture.

The Demise of Father

On the day the *Purnahuti Yagya* was completed, Panditji's condition deteriorated by nightfall. After his voice became mute, he stopped his physical movements also. He used to lie down on the bed and communicate with others using hand signals. His lips were continuously vibrating as though he was doing the *Japa* of *Dvadashakshari* (12-syllable) mantra. The next day, he stopped taking any food. When his family members insisted, he told them through gestures that the end had come and they should not try to give food and keep the body alive. Within 2 days, the news of Panditji's illness and his decision to shed the body spread amongst their friends and relatives. They began to stream in to enquire about his welfare. The house was crowded with people. Panditji would look at everyone and greet him or her with folded hands. He could not say anything but from the countenance of his face, it looked as if he was seeking forgiveness for any mistakes he had done or if his behaviour had caused them any pain. After this expression of feelings, the other persons would also reply to him. On hearing their replies, Panditji's face would light up. On the morning of *Shukla Paksha Dasami*, Panditji called his son Shriram. He asked him in sign language that he be put in sitting position. He then assumed *Padmasan* (the cross-legged posture), kept both hands in his lap, closed his eyes and sat quietly for a few moments. After sitting in *Dhyan mudra* for five to seven minutes, the mantra '*Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya*' escaped from his lips.

He asked his son to read the basic (*mool*) *Bhagavat*. Shriram began to read the four basic *shlokas* '*Ahamevasamevagre nanyad yat sadasatparam paschadaham* ——————— %%. After reading the *shlokas*, he began to explain the meaning for the benefit of all those present there - 'The Lord says: I alone was there at the beginning of creation. There was no truth or untruth; or physical, subtle and causal nature. At the end of creation also, I alone will be present. The universe that is visible is also Me. That which remains after the dissolution of the universe is also Me. This has been explained as the nature of Brahma. The appearance of untruth, weakness and grief in the *Jivatma* is also Me. When *Sat-Chit* and *Anand* are not felt in the *Jivatma*, know that it is also due to my Divine *Maya*. Just as the five basic elements (soil, water, fire, air and space) are present in everything - big and small, I am present in those basic elements and also absent from them. The seekers of Truth should understand that whatever is present and absent everywhere is the Supreme Spirit.'

By the time the meaning was read out, Panditji's soul separated from the body. His individual consciousness merged into the universal consciousness. In the posture that he was seated, scholars explain that such people merge into their adored deity. Panditji was sixty seven years old then. The moment he left his body, crying and grieving began all around. However, Shriram was very serious as though lost in contemplation or trying to understand something.

This was the first time Shriram saw the snapping of bond of body and soul. The moment, crying and wailing started, Shriram sat cross-legged near his father. He was sitting in a *Padmasan* posture just like his father. Taiji saw her son imitating his father and must have felt that he too was leaving her and hence let out a piteous cry. She was shaking her son out of the cross-legged position instead of going through the symbolic rituals of widowhood. Shriram did not budge from his position. The family members tried to console Taiji. According to his family members, it was natural for Shriram to try to understand death in his own way. After sitting steady in *dhyan mudra* for about 20 minutes, Shriram got up and busied himself in the arrangements to bid farewell to his father's body.

After *Antyeshti* (cremation) and *maronattar sanskars* (last rites), the discussion about who should be the successor of Panditji's heirdom came up amongst the family members. Shriram cut himself out of the property affairs saying that he would only continue the tradition of *Bhagavat Katha* and nothing else. He said that he would keep himself for only God's work. On hearing this, the family members realized that this was the effect of seven - day *Katha* that Panditji narrated to him before death. They thought that once the worldly responsibilities weigh on his shoulders, he would understand the stark realities of life. The eldest remaining member of the family, Jyoti Prasad, took over the headship of the family. As per the tradition, others also got their share of inheritance. Till the end, Shriram kept saying that he was not meant for family life or for managing the land and property. He just wanted to follow his *Dharma*.

Some Incidents

After the demise of his father, Shriram began to feel lonely. There were many other family members, but their interests were primarily in material possessions. They were busy in managing the farms, in collecting taxes and in the work related to the court. They had good understanding of astrology, ayurveda, governance and social service. Shriram was interested in yoga, meditation, spirituality and the basic truths of existence.

There were many incidents in Shriram's childhood which speak of his nobility of character and trustful nature. In villages mothers took special care of feeding milk and butter to their children. One day, Shriram saw how a cow was milked. The calf was first taken to the cow. The udders of the cow would fill with milk. The calf was then taken away and the cow was milked. The cow kept looking at her calf lovingly through the entire process of milking and would try to reach out to her calf. Shriram was pained to see the helplessness of the cow and the calf. He went into the house and told his mother that he would not drink milk henceforth.

Taiji and other family members tried to explain that milk gave strength and the capacity to fight against diseases. Shriram had only one reply for everyone – 'I do not want to strengthen my body by snatching the food of the calf.' The process of convincing him continued for months. At last, a consensus was reached that the calf be left to suck the milk of its mother till its hunger was satisfied and after it had moved away from the cow on its own, the cow should be milked. The milk thus got would be acceptable to Shriram. The milk obtained thus was very little but it was felt that it was more important to take care of the needs of the calves too.

There is an incident about buying a lock from the market. The regular household chores were done by servants. The mother felt that Shriram should have a practical idea about worldly tasks. The lock of a suitcase needed replacement. A new lock would cost two to three quarter of a paisa. Mother gave Shriram money and asked him to get a new lock. The shopkeeper quoted the price of the lock as three paise. This was definitely four or five times the price told by his mother. Shriram told the shopkeeper that he was charging him more money. But the shopkeeper insisted that this was the actual price and he could enquire about it anywhere. Before the shopkeeper could complete his argument, Shriram took out three paise and took the lock, asking the shopkeeper to stop his lame talk. He said 'Stop talking. I know the actual price of the lock but I am giving the price you quoted. I trust you.' On reaching home, Taiji gave him a small lecture and the incident was forgotten. After this, Shriram went past that shop several times but never lifted his head to look at the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper used to see him and expect that Shriram would halt. One day, he called out to Shriram and said, 'I repent for what I have done. I had taken extra money from you. I don't know why greed overwhelmed me and I took four times the actual price of the lock. Please take back the extra money I took then and forgive me.' Shriram listened to the plea silently. When the shopkeeper continued to apologize even after returning the money, Shriram said, 'Uncle, what is there to repent about now? I listened to you then and even today I have no complaint against you.'

This incident from his youth exhibits his tendency to trust others. Because of this habit, he had to bear losses several times but his philosophy was that only trust can transform a person. The lack of trust leads to increase in doubt and evil. It also distances people from one another.

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Buds Started Shooting

Second Journey to Mathura

After Shriram's first attempt to go to the Himalayas, he did not even cross the borders of Aanwalkheda on his own will. He had gone to his mother's native place but that was alongwith his father and the entire family. Mathura had attracted Shriram. One day, after the *Shraddha Karma* (ceremony in the honour of the deceased) of father was over, Shriram asked Taiji, 'Mother, if I give my word that I will return home, will you permit me to go to Mathura?' The way he put forth his request did not give any chance to his mother to refuse. When she asked how long he would take to return, he replied that he would be back in 8 to 10 days. Taiji happily gave her consent. In those days, there were no regular rapid means of transport. The journey from Aawalkheda to Mathura and back itself would take 3 to 4 days. She was tempted once to ask the 12-year old Shriram to stay back. But she knew that it would break his heart. She suggested that someone should accompany him. But Shriram wanted to go alone. She acceded to the request of her son and the next day arranged for his clothes, bedding and money for his travel and accommodation.

Shriram reached Mathura the next day, travelling by a combination of bullock-cart, horse and rail. They had some relatives in Mathura, but he chose not to go to their house and laid his camp at *Shyamji ki Bagichi* instead. After visiting the temple of Dwarkadhish, Vishram Ghat, etc he traveled through the Vrindavan Road and reached a *Bagichi* (a small garden-cum-rest house). There was a small well and 3 to 4 open rooms with a provision for taking bath and rest. A number of such *Bagichis* were located on the road from Mathura to Vrindavan. The Vraj region had many such *Bagichis*. Rich people spent their evenings there. The presence of trees and flowering plants gave a pleasant atmosphere to the place. Typically, near such a garden, a small temple dedicated to a god or goddess was also present. Normally there used to be an idol of Hanuman, but there were idols of Radha-Krishna, Durga or any saint or Mahatma also. The *Bagichi* in which Shriram was staying had a temple that had an idol of a goddess. When he enquired, whose idol it was, nobody could give a clear answer. Someone said that it was the idol of Durga while others said that it was Lakshmi or Sita. Anyway, Shriram liked that idol a lot.

Shriram stayed in that place for about a week. He used to take bath in the morning and leave the place only to return in the evening. In Mathura-Vridavan, *Bhandaras* (distribution of food offered to the Lord) used to be organized in several places. Even if one did not work for a living, they could easily survive out of the *Bhandaras* served in the Ashrams. Even today, many people live on *Bhandaras*. Shriram used to visit these ashrams but he was never interested in the food they served. He would eat whatever his mother had packed in Aawalkheda.

For a change, he would buy some light food from the shop of Phoolchand Pedewale near Dwarkadhish temple or from Chauk, and spent all his time in seeing places.

Meeting Kathia Baba

During his daylong walks, he rarely went to the temples. Most of his time was spent in *Ashrams* and on the banks of the Yamuna. It appeared as though he was in search of something. As long as he stayed in the *Bagichi*, he would concentrate on the idol of the Goddess. He would get up, go and see it. He asked every new person who came about whose idol it was. One day he received the answer to his question in a very unique way. It so happened that a saint came to the *Bagichi*. His name was Baba Ramdas, but he was popularly known as Kathiya Baba because he wore a loincloth made of *Kath* (meaning wood). It was so arranged around his waist that it could be loosened or removed when required.

Kathiya Baba used to stay in Vrindavan but had not established an *Ashram* for himself. He came to the *Bagichi* that morning with a loud chant of 'Jai Ambe'. He took bath near the well and went for a darshan of the deity installed there. He sat in the temple for a long time. He was not doing any kind of worship but was simply meditating. Shriram was observing him with curiosity. The moment he got up from meditation, Shriram fell at his feet. Kathiya Baba immediately said, 'No child, No' and took two steps backward and, in a normal voice asked 'Where have you come from?' Shriram gave his typical introduction. Baba then asked, 'Where are you going?' To that Shriram replied, 'Destination is same for everyone, but I am not able to figure out how to reach it.' Baba's face lit up with this answer. Baba said, 'You are going in the right direction. So, how can you say that you do not know the path?'

Kathiya Baba Speaks about Himself.

A discussion began between them and continued for a long time. Kathiya Baba narrated about his *sadhana* and his journey till date. It was the Baba who informed Shriram that the idol in the temple was that of Goddess Gayatri. There used to be an *Ashram*, 300 to 400 years back, in the same place where the *Bagichi* was situated. Twenty to twenty five *sadhaks* continuously stayed in the *Ashram* in the presence of a *Sanyasi*. They used to do *Gayatri Jap* and study the Vedas and scriptures. Baba also told that hundreds of years back, *Bhagavat* discourses used to take place in the very same place. On hearing Baba's words, Shriram felt an inspiration to do *Gayatri Mantra Japa* in a larger count. He was anyway initiated with Gayatri Mantra when he was invested with the sacred thread. Hence the *sadhana* began.

Baba did not say where he was born or who were there in his family. A *sanyasi* is not supposed to give an introduction about his previous worldly life. When a *sadhak* becomes a *sanyasi* (an ascetic), his '*Antyeshti*' (ritual of cremation) is performed. He is laid on the funeral pyre and once the pyre is lit, he is lifted back. The purpose of these rituals is to create the feeling of a new life. It is advised that he forget about his previous life because it has ended. Just as death snatches away one's personality and resources; in the same way, the previous life has also receded to the background.

Kathiya Baba said that after his studies, he returned home. There was an intense desire to do *Gayatri Anushthan*. There was a garden near his house that had a huge banyan tree. He decided to do his *anushthan* beneath this tree. He started the *anushthan* in a methodical way after doing '*Kavacha*' etc. He was well-versed with the procedure of *anushthan* as he had learnt it from his Guru.

After completing a part of *anushthan*, he received an inspiration to complete the rest of *Jap* at Jwalamukhi (*Shaktipeeth* in Himachal Pradesh). The nature of inspiration was such that it appeared as if someone was standing in front of him and asking him or the voice was coming from the banyan tree. Jwalamukhi was 60 Km from his residence. He got up from his seat beneath the banyan tree and headed for Jwalamukhi instead of going home. One of Baba's nephews also used to meditate along with him. He too followed Baba to Jwalamukhi. Both of them began to walk in a non-stop manner. On their way, they met a *Mahatma*. Without even a preliminary introduction, he asked him 'Will you take *sanyas* (renunciation)?' Kathiya baba did not give a second thought and agreed to it. The preparations for the *sanyas* began and the nephew got worried and tried to dissuade Baba. His cries and pleas had no effect on the Baba. The nephew ran back and brought his grandfather- Baba's father.

By the time his father arrived, it was too late. The son had become a *sanyasi*. He was grief stricken and pleaded with his son to return home. The son told his father that there was no scope for retraction from *sanyas ashram*. The father tried to explain that nobody had seen him becoming a *sanyasi* and hence they could come up with some excuse to defend his shaven head. Kathiya Baba remained unflinched and refused to even recognize his father as per the rules of *Sanyas*. His father returned home deeply dejected.

Baba chose to sit beneath the banyan tree where he was initiated into *sanyas*. He continued to meditate till late night. He slept for a few hours past midnight and began to medidate again in the morning. In the course of meditation, he had the vision of Mother Bhagvati who asked him to seek a boon. Kathiya Baba replied that he did not have any desires left. He told the Divine Mother that he had taken *sanyas* and that there was no desire remaining in his being. He sought Her blessings so that no desire would ever arise in him in future also. Kathiya Baba was endowed with various spiritual attainments (*siddhis*). Whatever he uttered became manifest. Whoever came to him for refuge were relieved of their sufferings.

The Remarkable Orchard and Meeting with Booti Siddha Baba

Kathiya Baba told several astonishing things related to the place where the *Bagichi* stood. One of the interesting facts was that Sage Durvasa had done Gayatri *Sadhana* here in *Treta Yug*. Sri Krishna and Balram had stopped here to do their *Sandhyavandan* on their way to Mathura to kill Kansa. Kathiya Baba also told Shriram about several *Yagya Anushthans* that had been performed in the place from time to time. Baba then asked Shriram to follow him and they went to a hillock that was three kilometers from the *Bagichi*. These days there is a college near the hillock. The elderly know of this hillock as '*Gayatri Teela*'.

Baba took Shriram to the top of the hillock. In a hut, an elderly saint was lying down. Both of them offered their salutations to him. The name of the saint was Booti Siddha Maharaj. He had gone into silence (*Mauna Vrat*) for the past 30 to 40 years. He never spoke to anyone and communicated through gestures when he needed something. Sometimes, he even used to communicate through writing. He was a native of Alwar but had settled there for several decades. Kathiya Baba was told about Booti Siddha Maharaj that he had done a one crore *japa*. His remarkable devotion had won him the grace of Mother Gayatri and he had attained self-realization.

After attaining *Siddhi*, he installed an idol of Gayatri on the hillock and offered food to all scholarly Brahmins of Mathura. Whatever took place after the installation of the idol was a wondrous happening on its own. How the required resources came in, nobody knew except Booti Baba himself. People believed that Baba had a special gadget that bestowed him with the required resources on worshipping it. The deprived, grief stricken and diseased people also visited the Baba. He never spoke anything to them but raised his hand in the form of a blessing. People believed that if Baba blessed them, then that was the end of their sufferings and it used to come true in the lives of many people who came to his blessings.

The kings of princely states of Dhaulpur and Alwar used to come to Baba. Booti Baba himself never traveled to any place. If he wanted solitude, he went into the cave near his hut. Kathiya Baba introduced Shriram to Booti Siddha Maharaj. He was overwhelmed with Shriram's faith and *Sadhana*. He raised both his hands and blessed him and also embraced him in a hug. After this, Kathiya Baba went his own way and Shriram returned to the Bagichi. A few days after the meeting, Booti Siddha Baba left his mortal body.

In the Bagichi, Shriram had heard from a devotee that a saint had come to the Banks of Yamuna in Vrindavan. The saint never went anywhere leaving the banks of Yamuna and Ganga. He used to construct a raised platform (*machan*) on the bank and stay there. He used to speak to people from there. At times, he would stay in a hut built near the raised platform. Whatever time was left after the *sadhana* and *upasana* was spent in talking to people. In addition to these details, Shriram heard many more things about the saint - that he was not affected by hunger or thirst; nobody had ever seen him eating food; that he did not attend to nature's calls. Lot of time was saved because of being devoid of hunger and thirst, which was spent on *dhyan dharna*.

People had told strange things about his age too. Some said that he was 200 years old, while some others said that he was 600-700 years old. The folk tale was that even their grandparents and great grandparents had seen the Baba in the same physical state. Looking at Baba's healthy body, one would say that he was no more than 30 to 35 years old. People said that he maintained his health through *yogic siddhis*. Whenever he desired, he could transform his body. He either made the same body new or assumed a new body that looked similar to his earlier body in all respects. Shriram listened to these with lot of interest but never expressed any reaction. He was overcome by curiosity and started on his way to Vrindavan. It was summer then, but Yamuna was not dry as it would today. Plenty of water flowed in the river. These days, during the months of May and June, the river dries up so much that one can easily walk across the river. But in those days, there was plenty of water.

Salutations to You Child!

There was a boat service to cross Yamuna. Shriram reached the banks of the river seeking the address and details of the saint. He crossed the river in a boat and reached the raised platform on which the saint was seated. It was afternoon and there were four or five people standing in front of the platform. The saint saw Shriram from a distance and lovingly called out, 'Come, O son of the *rishi* (seer). You were long awaited, my child.' Hearing the words of Baba, Shriram turned back to see for whom the welcome was intended. Again Baba called out, 'I am talking to you only, Shriram.' Shriram's doubts were dispelled on hearing his name. The hesitation that existed to move ahead was removed. He walked at a natural pace and reached the place where Baba was seated and prostrated before him.

Baba raised both his hands and said, 'Salutations to you also my child.' The people present there were surprised to hear this. In reply to the salutations of the devotees, Baba used to either say- 'Blessings to you my child, or 'Be happy, my child' Now Baba was responding to the twelve - thirteen years old boy with a salutation that was unique and surprising. What the Baba uttered a little later reduced their wonder a little bit. Baba said, 'Child, I had received the message about your coming here through the divine souls. I am very happy to have you here.'

Shriram was listening to all this silently. Baba continued, 'Child, chant the Gayatri Mantra' and he himself began to chant it aloud. Since he was a Vaishnava saint, he always used to make devotees chant the 12-letter mantra '*Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya*.' After completing the Gayatri Mantra, Baba said, 'Child, you are *Savitri Siddha*. You are destined to accomplish great deeds. Many great Yogis and saints live in the caves of the Himalayas. Nobody knows for how many hundreds of years they have been doing penance there. Those sages have blessed you. Those souls will help and guide you.' Baba kept saying many such things. His talk had symbolic information about the occult world of the Himalayas. Baba was not very much conversant in spoken Hindi. He used to speak rustic (*Sadhukaddi)* Hindi. If one tried to understand him by his words, then there was a possibility of misinterpretation. But if one understood his intentions, then Baba could be understood well.

The Secret of Baba's age

Shriram asked, 'Baba, I have heard many miraculous things about you. What is the secret of all these?' Baba replied, 'There is no miracle bigger than this world created by God. I do not know what people talk about me. But I just pray for the welfare of the devotees who come to me. If my prayer is fulfilled, it is the Grace of the Lord and if it does not, then also it is His will. Nothing happens without His will, child.' He spoke about his age thus - 'Physical body is mortal. What is the use of asking about its age? The people in the village where I was born did not maintain the date and time of my birth. Hence I do not know the age of this body.' It became clear with this reply about why people kept making estimates of his age. Baba again continued, 'I was of your age when I left home. I spent a long period of time on the banks of the river Narmada. I visited many pilgrimage places like Dwaraka, Rameshwaram, Puri, Badrinath and many others. Then I chose the banks of Mother Ganga. When Mother asked me to shift to the banks of Yamuna I came here. Now, I have stopped any kind of travel.' Baba paused a little while after saying this and then said, 'But the Creator has carved a different path for you. Your Gurudev will tell you everything at the appropriate time.' Shriram did not feel it necessary to ask about the time when he would meet his Guru. He understood the indications given by the Baba in his talk and left the place that very evening.

Secret of *Maha Raas*

That night he halted at Brindavan. He had heard about a *Bagichi* where Radha and Krishna do *Raas* (divine dance) everyday. He had heard that after the *Raas*, they physically rested there. Hence during that time nobody went to the *Bagichi*; and if someone went, he would be harmed. Shriram had no issues about the *Raas* of Radha and Krishna, but a doubt arose in his mind that if someone stayed back in the *Bagichi* to have the *darshan* of Radha and Krishna, then why should he be harmed? Whoever had the *darshan* of the Lord should be blessed with bliss. The young mind of Shriram decided to have the doubt clarified. He met a Vaishnav Sadhu Gopaldas going to the *Bagichi*. Shriram asked him about the presence of Radha and Krishna in the *Bagichi*. Sadhu Gopaldas replied, 'Their presence is continuously felt. The entire world is His divine dance. He is dancing in each and every atom of Brindavan, but the presence is more acutely experienced here as the mind of the *Sadhak* is more aware and absorbing here.' He felt that the words of the Sadhu were incoherent. Shriram interrupted him in the middle and asked, 'Do Radha and Krishna come to the *Bagichi* physically during the night?'

The Sadhu smiled. Shriram again asked, 'If He is God, then why people get harmed on having his *darshan*?' On hearing this, the Sadhu pointed him to the staircase leading to the temple and said, 'Shri Krishna is going there. See Radha Rani is also with him.' Shriram looked towards the stairs. Dark-colored Shri Krishna and fair-complexioned Shri Radha were climbing the temple steps. They turned their heads to look at the Sadhu and Shriram. For a few moments, the surrounding people, shops, lanes, houses and the din receded and the form of Radha and Krishna alone remained. For a few moments, he lost his outer consciousness and attained a state of *Bhaav Samadhi*; after that, everything came back to normalcy. Sadhu Gopaldas said, 'This kind of vision is the outer manifestation of the Lord within us. After *Sadhana* intensifies, such vision and experiences become normal. But don't stop here. Continue your *Sadhana* beyond that.'

The Sadhu clarified that, 'The *darshan* of the Lord is by no means inauspicious. There is more hypocrisy than truth in the hearsay that Radha and Krishna visit the *Bagichi* and play *Raas*. The greatness of the *Bagichi* is extolled thus so that unscrupulous people can extract money from those who believe this. By spreading the fear of harm, people are terrorized and go to the *Bagichi* during the day to give offerings. If you want to examine the truth, why don't you spend a night in the *Bagichi*?' Sadhu Gopaldas unraveled the secret and even asked Shriram to see the truth himself. Shriram traced his steps towards the *Bagichi*.

He went into the *Bagichi* a little before the evening. Before closing the door, the Brahmin custodians searched the place thoroughly and hence Shriram hid himself behind some shrubs. After they left, Shriram came out of his hiding place and proceeded to the room where Radha and Krishna were supposed to relax. He found a thicket twenty feet from the room and sat behind it. Night was setting in. The door of the room was open. The atmosphere was very peaceful. Even the chirping of the birds and the sounds of animals had ceased. Except for an occasional sound, everything was quiet. The night began to grow darker. It was past midnight. Shriram was looking at the room without batting an eyelid. He was getting tired of the long wait and began to feel sleepy. He went to a well in the *Bagichi* and drank some water and washed his face and hands to ward off his sleep. He again resumed the vigil behind the thicket.

Series of Incidents During the Night

There was some sound because of drawing water from the well and washing. Immediately after this, he began to hear a *Keertan* (Song). The song stopped after sometime. Meanwhile, there was a sound of anklets in the *Bagichi.* The jingling sound pervaded as though someone was dancing. This continued for sometime and later stopped. There were sounds of *Keertan* from outside the *Bagichi* for sometime. The *Bagichi* reverberated with the music of flute or tabla or harmonium until about 5'O clock in the morning. The room was lit thrice with a lamp. He could see a person lighting the lamp. After 5 to 7 minutes, the lamp got extinguished as though someone blew it out.

Two people were seen near the room at about five in the morning. They spent sometime in the room and went back. A little later, he could hear the sounds of Aarti and worship outside the *Bagichi.* People began to stream in after the Aarti. Shriram joined a group of 8 to 10 people and went into the room. The people with him were overcome with emotion on entering the room. The blanket spread on the bed was crumpled as though someone had slept on it. The lid of the oil bottle was open. One of them said, 'The amount of oil kept last evening has reduced.' The other said, 'The box of vermilion is open. Radha Rani must have adorned herself with it.' A third person said, 'The Lord has forgotten his yellow robe here.' In this way, wonder and hype were increased. These people had visited the room last evening and everything was fine. The bedspread was clean, the vermillion box was in its place, and the oil bottle was full. Looking at the room now, it was clear that someone had used it for their hairdo. These people had stayed outside the *Bagichi* after the evening *darshan* and had been the first entrants in the morning.

Shriram understood very well that the visit of Radha and Krishna to the *Bagichi* was a well-orchestrated drama based on what he saw during the night and what he was witnessing during the morning. All the sound of anklets and instruments, illumination of the room and the people going in and out of the room were organized to create the scene of Radha and Krishna visiting the *Bagichi.* The same people changed the face of the room at five in the morning and influenced the people outside that the Lord had indeed come there. The devotees offered silver coins and sweets. They offered additional money for feeding the Brahmins.

Shriram remembered the words of Sadhu Gopaldas that God was everywhere! He is where the devotees call Him with deep devotion. When one does not seek the Lord, then even if the Lord appears in front of him, he cannot recognize. Shriram witnessed the entire course of events with a calm mind and left the *Bagichi* without expressing any reaction. The Brahmins thought that this boy had also come along with a group of devotees. They did not know that this boy had witnessed the entire drama staged by them.

The Vision of the Future

The trip to Brindavan came to an end. He stopped in Mathura for a day and stayed at the same *Bagichi* where he had met Kathiya Baba. He sat cross-legged in front of the idol of Gayatri. Shriram's mind began to feel a wave-like sensation as though some information or instructions were being received. He felt that time was moving fast and he was growing older and had crossed twenty five – thirty – forty years of age. He began to feel that he was forty years old and was seated in the same place. Many people were doing *Sadhana* in this place. *Aarti, havan* etc were being performed. There was a flow of people into and out of the place. This experience lasted for a while and then it vanished. (Later, in the year 1953, Gayatri Tapobhoomi was established at this very place.) After doing *Sandhyavandan* the following morning, he had the *darshan* of Dwarkadheesh and started back for Agra. He remembered to take the *prasad* for Taiji. When he returned to Aanwalkheda, he found his mother waiting at the doorstep, as if she had known about his arrival. He touched the feet of Taiji in reverence and she blessed him. She said that her child had now grown up and become capable of shouldering responsibilities and that the Lord had dispelled all her worries.

After reaching Aanwalkheda, Shriram resumed his normal life routine. Activities like cultivation of crops, ancestral farming and interaction with landlords began as before. Everybody in the family was missing the presence of his father. They all suggested that Shriram should take up the profession of his father and start narrating *Bhagavat Katha*. All relatives and friends who visited them gave the same advice. Even his mother silently approved this but Shriram's heart never consented to sit on the *Vyaspeeth*.

Anger Aroused in Shriram

After 1919-20, non-cooperation movement had started all over India. The aim of the movement at that time was not to achieve complete independence; it was meant for certain constitutional amendments so that Indians could also take part in the governance of the country. Mahatma Gandhi had become the voice of the soul of India and he had emerged as the supreme leader of the movement. After the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, he had called the British government in India as 'Satan' and appealed to his fellow countrymen to boycott courts, schools and colleges; those who were in government jobs were called upon to resign from their jobs and thus how complete non-cooperation with the foreign government. Countrywide strike was observed on March 30 and April 16. On the days of strike, life came to a halt all over the country, businesses were closed and British officers were left helpless. This strike had shown the full efficacy of the non-cooperation weapon.

The movement continued and took on a fiercely defiant nature. The government also took harsh steps to curb the agitation. Thousands of people were jailed. The repression continued without any let-up. In the face of this repression, people could not remain silent and violence broke out in many places. Mahatma Gandhi categorically disapproved this violence. He expected the agitators to remain non-violent till the end. He believed that once we resorted to violence, God would leave us. If non-violence is followed at all costs, then Divinity will emerge within the people. When the non co-operation movement did not run as per his intentions, he accepted his folly. He said that without preparing people for non-violence, starting the non co-operation movement was a blunder. To rectify this mistake, he called off the movement.

The movement, with which Mahatma Gandhi had promised to achieve self governance (*swaraj*) within one year, could not succeed. This call for self-governance had not reached the momentum of either 'call for complete independence' of 1929 or the 'Quit India movement' of 1942. It aimed at a limited participation of people in the governance of the country. Even though Gandhiji had only temporarily withdrawn the movement, people termed it as a failure. This was true to some extent. Yet, it had removed the fear from the minds of people with respect to the repression by the government, British guns and jails. After this fear vanished from the minds of the people, the British also realized that they would have to leave India sooner or later. Their tyranny to curb the feelings of the people became more severe. As a result, the feelings of revenge got strengthened in the minds of people.

The rising anger against the British influenced all the people including the youth, the teenagers and women. In the village Anwalkheda this anger was first visible in young Shriram. While returning from his trip to Mathura-Vrindavan, he heard that Gandhiji was arrested. Rallies were taken out protesting against his arrest. Shriram pushed back the sweet memories of Mathura-Vrindavan and started taking part in arranging *prabhat pheries* (morning processions). The elders of the village advised him not to attend the rallies as the police could attack and arrest the people at any time. They said that he was still a kid and advised him to stay back from such activities. Shriram refused saying that even the kids have some responsibilities towards the freedom movement. He sought their blessings to fulfill his national duties well.

A few days later, the news arrived that Gandhiji was being sentenced to 6 months in jail. He was tried for treason. Shriram was present in a meeting when this news came. He said, "Let them also try us in the court. Let the rule of evil be destroyed." This intense feeling in a twelve-year old boy overwhelmed all the people – young and old – in the meeting. In this meeting, Shriram declared that he would create an army of youngsters and do something or other against the British rule.

Organization of the Youth Brigade

He gathered 8-10 kids of his age and started rallies of young boys. After the *prabhat pheri*, all the boys would gather in the Hanuman temple. They would bow down to Lord Hanuman and start their exercises. They had caught on to the words of the *swaraji* youth, Charan Bhaiya that the youth should have sturdy bodies to fight against the British. If the body was weak, it could not take on even one hit by a police *lathi* (stick). The weak would crumble immediately on being hit and it was necessary to develop a strong body. Seeing the preparation of the youngsters for the freedom movement, Charan Bhaiyya and other elders in the village arranged for milk and breakfast in the temple premises. The breakfast consisted of jaggery and soaked chick-peas.

This group of young fighters showed its prowess from time to time. They would attack on any front where they saw atrocities. Agra had a cantonment and the English army was stationed there. The army men would do what pleased them; and committed atrocities on the people. They used people as unpaid laborers. They would play any trick on people for their entertainment. People were terrified by these excesses and would not even pass by the cantonment. People would hide themselves if they saw a soldier, particularly when he was a British. Their oppression was known all around Agra. These incidents were described as if they were ghost stories in Anwalkheda too. They would be discussed in the young army. They took an oath that they would not tolerate the oppression by any soldier –Indian or British. They would try to stop them, or at least show their anger towards their acts of oppression.

Encounter with British Troops

The time to test the mettle of the young fighters came soon. Soldiers normally never entered villages. One day an English officer took some 5-7 soldiers and started towards Anwalkheda. The news of their arrival reached the villagers. The young army met and soon decided on a plan of action on how to react to any atrocity by these troops. With this resolution, they sat at the entrance of the village. They had come fully prepared. What they did not know was the exact time when the soldiers would come. So, they stationed themselves at the gate from early morning.

Around 12:30 – 1 PM, they saw dust rising due to galloping horses. Shriram signaled his mates. The troops must have created havoc in the previous village, they guessed. The young army decided not to let the troops enter the village. The young boys redoubled their resolve. They lifted stones and catapults. Their resolve became stronger. As the troops arrived, Shriram jumped down on to the road.

An Indian soldier among the troops asked Shriram what he was up to. There was no reply. The question was repeated and yet there was no response. The soldier did not like this brashness. He got down the horse and moved to slap the boy. Just as the soldier was to slap him, Shriram removed some chilly powder from his pocket in a flash and blew it into the eyes of the soldier. The soldier had never imagined such reaction even in his dreams. He became restless with pain. The next moment, catapults started raining stones on the troops. Before the officer realized what was happening, a big piece of wood fell on his helmet and it fell down. He started hurling insults. No one could understand where the attack was coming from.

This attack continued for some ten minutes and suddenly stopped. This attack irritated the soldiers. They assumed that this was the handiwork of the villagers and entered the village to teach them a lesson. People hid themselves in the village as the officer shouted – "Those who were part of this prank come forward or the entire village will be punished". People trembled in their houses as the officer warned again "Pranksters, come out of the houses."

Then, Charan Bhaiya came out. He asked – "What has happened Colonel Saheb? What prank was played on you?" The colonel replied –"Bring that boy in front of me who threw chilli powder in my soldier's eyes. Also get them, who rained stones on us. Let us see who these freedom fighters are" Charan Bhaiya replied –"No one in the village would dare do such a thing. It must certainly be the act of the dacoit Surajee. His gang has a boy who is known for throwing chilli into people's eyes."

The officer asked in broken Hindi – "Where does this dacoit stay?" Charan Bhaiya replied – "Do these thieves have any permanent residence? It was good that you came across him or else, he would have entered the village and created havoc here. But it appears that even you were not spared by his gang." The officer felt puzzled and said – "No, we were not troubled, but if you hear about the whereabouts of this dacoit, send a message to the cantonment and we will deal with him"

The troops left without staying any longer in the village. Charan Bhaiiya knew who was behind all this. The plan for attacking the troops was drawn up under his own supervision. This was a risky task. But if nothing had been done, the troops would have created mayhem in the village. This successful attack increased the confidence of the young army. They continued to laugh for a long time after the troops had left the village. When some people came to know of their actions, they initially were upset, but broke into laughter seeing the bravery of the kids.

Companion of Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement

The young fighters also fought against landlords who committed atrocities on the laborers working in the fields. The main aim of this army was to be a part of the freedom movement. What comes under the umbrella of Independence? What is the meaning of the British rule? They did not go into the depths of such topics. What filled the boys with anger was Gandhiji's arrest. Gandhi to them was a name of a person who was fighting for truth and justice; a person who neither took revenge on anyone nor fought a personal battle with anyone. His fight was based on principles. The name Gandhi was a synonym with not bowing down to atrocities and not to cooperate with anyone who committed atrocities.

Under Shriram's leadership, the young army started a curious experiment of non-cooperation with such landlords. They would either hide their sticks or let the oxen run free. Shriram and other members of the army like Charan Bhaiya, Soraji, Mohanlal tried to teach the bonded laborers to be unafraid. They would establish contact with the laborers and try to convince them that it was better to oppose the atrocities than succumb to them. This increased their self confidence. Some of them left their work and started leading a new life again.

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6

'I Surrender Myself to You, Gurudev!'

Deeksha Gave Direction

The light of the stars had begun to fade in the east. The darkness had begun to lift slowly and the birds had woken up and started their chirping. Shriram began to spread his mat in the *Pooja* room. Sitting on it, he started his *Sandhyavandan* by chanting '*Apavitraha pavitro vaa | sarvavastham gatoapivaa...*

Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviyaji had taught him the rituals of *Sandhyavandan* during *Mantra deeksha*. He had also said that *sandhyavandan* had to be done twice a day. The time, place and rituals were explained then and the words of Malaviyaji had become ingrained in Shriram's memory. With the passage of time, this routine became a natural part of life. Amongst the places considered best in scriptures for doing *sandhyavandan* are holy places, banks of rivers, sacred lakes, caves in mountains, mountain tops, solitary gardens, temples and one's own house. Shriram used to do *sandhyavandan* in a temple situated on the outskirts of the village. After his father's demise, he began to do it at home. One room of the vast house was set apart for this purpose. The door of the room opened to the east. There was a small Tulsi plant outside. He would sit facing east for the worship. For *Arghya* (offering of water to the Sun), he would go to the Tulsi plant, bow to the Sun and offer water in such a way that it would fall only in the bed of the plant.

When he used to do *sandhyavandan* in the temple, there was no need to go out for offering *arghya*. Now that he had started worshipping at home, at the behest of his mother, he had to go out of the room to offer the *arghya*. The time of worship was chosen with the same care as was given to the place of worship. He always tried to adhere to that time. In the morning, it would start just before sunrise and in the evening, it was just before sunset.

Shriram would get up at four in the morning. It took him an hour to complete the daily chores. He drew water from the well in the house. There would be light from a lantern, so it was not difficult. Most people in the house would wake up by then, yet Shriram would take care that he did not create any noise with his activities that would disturb others. No one would even be aware of his activities.

Once the *Sandhya* began, he would become completely involved in his *Japa* and meditation. It would take him forty minutes to complete the worship, but even in this short time, he would become completely engrossed. To chant one *mala* (108 times) of Gayatri Mantra and meditate on the rising golden Sun took about six minutes. With practice, it could be completed in about four minutes. There was a slight possibility of a wrong count in this method of meditating based on duration of the *japa*. Shriram would do five *malas* of *Japa* in the morning and two *malas* of *japa* in the evening. He would be so engrossed that there was no chance of a mistake. Overall, the morning and evening worship together took about an hour. The process of *Dhyan-Dharana* continued even after that.

Historic Moments

It was the day of *Vasanta Panchami* of *Vikrama Samvat* 1983. According to the English calendar, it was 18th January 1926. Shriram was about fifteen then. He was doing his morning *Sandhya* and was completely absorbed in his *Japa*. He was seated in *Sukhasana* and only his lips were moving. No sound was being made. *Japa* was in *Upanshu* state (where the lips move and the voice chords move but no sound is produced). In the silent *japa* where even the lips don't move, the time taken is more and there is also a chance of missing the *japa*. Hence, Malaviyaji had preferred *upanshu japa*. To this was added the meditation of the Sun rising in the east. With the eyes closed, the horizon that can be seen in between the eyebrows is the mountain on which the Sun rises. This place between the eyebrows is like two mountains meeting and a new light dawning there.

With the rising Sun, the golden light started spreading in the consciousness of Shriram. He was overwhelmed by this expanse of nature. This light was spreading in the body, mind, soul, intellect, and all still deeper planes that exist beyond them. Just as darkness retreats at the onset of dawn, this light was pushing out the weariness in the consciousness and filling a new exhilaration in its place. The freshness of the morning was being felt in every part of the body. This experience was deepening with the meditation of the golden Sun.

It is difficult to say which state of *japa* and *dhyan* was prevailing at the moment of which the incident is described in the following lines. As is found in the spiritual texts, this is what is known as the state of *Manolaya* (dissolution of the mind). In this state, the mind becomes completely still, steady, quiet and vacant. Yogic scriptures have described such a state of mind as '*Nirvat nishkamp deepshikha*'. The flame of a *Deepak* (lamp) becomes steady in the absence of wind; in the same way the vacillating mind, in the absence of desires, becomes steady. According to some yogis, this is the state of deep meditation.

The Manifestation of an Effulgent Apparition

Shriram was sitting on his mat and was in a state of *Manolaya* or *Samadhi*. He was reaching the last stage of his *Jap*. When the *Jap* completed, he offered the *Jap* to *Savita* and was sitting with folded hands. Just then a flash of dazzling light lit up the room. The light was bright but it was cooling. It was as if the light has the brightness of the Sun and the coolness of the Moon.

When the light flashed, it was as if a thousand suns rose together. When the dazzle subsided, a gentle figure appeared. He had long hair, thin but radiant body. The form looked thin and emaciated, but the apparition had effulgence and strength in equal measure. The body was naked and looked as if it was made of steel. There was a bright aura around the body and it also appeared that it was covered with snow at some places. Shriram was delighted to see the figure. His mind felt comforted. The fear that existed a moment before had vanished. Looking at the figure, Shriram's mind was filled with joy. He ardently wished to get up and bow to the figure. The ritual of *pradakshina* in the *sandhya* was pending. The Divine figure read the thoughts of Shriram and indicated to him to remain seated. Shriram looked at the figure intently as if *Savita* had appeared in the form of a Divine *Rishi*.

The figure came closer. It did not appear that the figure moved forward; instead it appeared that the distance between the two had reduced. The figure came so close that Shriram could stretch his hand and touch the figure's feet. Shriram's head bowed on its own at the feet of the Divine figure and the latter, in turn, placed his hand on Shriram's head as a sign of blessing. The touch set off indescribable vibrations in the entire body. The seers have tried in vain to explain this kind of experience in thousand ways and have ultimately given up. The Upanishads have explained it saying – "Those that hear (ears) cannot speak and those that speak (mouth) cannot hear" Kabir sang it as "*Goonge keri sarkaraa....*" (Like the dumb, one can taste it, but cannot explain the taste.)

The Time Appeared to Have Come to a Stop

The touch opened up a whole new world in front of Shriram. In that world, there was no need of speech; time had come to a standstill and the space had no boundaries. In that experience, transcending time and space, the guiding power took him on a tour of his previous lives. This tour was accomplished not by dipping into memory, but by entering the world of pure consciousness. As he entered that world, Shriram experienced as if he was in Varanasi. It is difficult to call that feeling as an experience. He was in Varanasi in a form that was completely different from the Shriram sitting in the room. He found himself in a strange form, but the world was not new. Being strange, it still had an air of naturalness to the point that Shriram was feeling that he was the lead actor in the drama that was unfolding.

In one scene, he saw Swami Ramanand going to Kashi Ghat for his bath. There was someone lying on the steps hoping to get *Deeksha* from Swamiji. He had tried to get initiated into *Deeksha* earlier, but the disciples had sent him back saying that the lower castes did not deserve a *Deeksha* of Ram-nam from an enlightened Guru. If they wished they could chant on their own. He was 'some' Saint Kabir. Shriram was seeing all this unfolding as he was sitting in the room. He saw himself lying on the steps. Swami Ramanand came to the Kashighat at dawn for his bath. Kabir had rolled himself up in such a way that he was not visible. Swamiji right foot touched Kabir and he realized that he had stepped on someone. With this realization, he exclaimed 'Ram, Ram'. Kabir immediately got up and holding onto Swamiji's legs, said "I have been blessed today Lord. I have received *Gurumantra*"

After this incident, Swami Ramanand formally initiated Kabir and accepted him as a disciple. The scholars, priests and others opposed this severely. Swamiji was called a betrayer of Dharma. This did not have any impact on him.

Kabir earned his livelihood by weaving cloth. Once sufficient cloth was woven, Kabir himself went to sell it. He would not set any price. He took whatever price was given for the cloth and would come back. Yet he never suffered losses. While leading a life of a house-holder, he preached to those who came to him in search of knowledge. Shriram saw an incident where about 10 people were gathered around Kabir. The subject of discussion was not limited to just spirituality, but extended to home, family, society and other day to day events. In one such *satsang*, someone asked Kabir – "You lead a very happy family life. What is the secret?" Kabir sat silent for a moment and then called out his wife Loi and said, "Loi, it is getting dark here. Please get a lamp." The onlookers were surprised. It was mid-day. The sun was blazing bright in the sky. Even the place where they were seated was well-lit. They were even more surprised when Loi got a lighted lamp and placed it on a small stool near Kabir and went back. Kabir explained – "When there is such trust between the two partners, the family lives happily. Loi also knew that there was no need for the lamp. But without raising a question, she followed my request silently."

The family had a limited income and there was a constant stream of visitors. The guests were always treated well. They lived in poverty. Kabir's son Kamaal grew up. He was fully aware of the poverty in the house. He focused on business and agriculture. Kabir insisted on purity and honest means earning in that field also. He initiated his son into practical spirituality and was given noble *Sanskaras*.

The Dispute over Kabir's body

In another scene, Kabir was seen scolding both Hindus and Muslims severely. He was stressing not artificial unity of all religions, but on harmony amongst the followers of different paths of worship. Even while the external rituals of various religions are drastically different, they propound only one truth. This truth is about the indwelling and all-pervading Divinity in the whole manifested cosmos. It is said that when Kabir died, both Hindus and Muslims wanted to perform the last rites as per their religious beliefs. Hindus wanted to cremate his body while Muslims wanted to bury it. It is said that when they removed the cloth covering the body, they found flowers instead of Kabir's dead body. Hindus took a part of the flowers and burnt them while Muslims buried the other half. Kabir's body formed out of the five elements reached its original form through different means. The story explains this truth.

There is a difference of opinion on where Kabir died. One school claims that when his last days approached, Kabir left Kashi and went to Maghar. This was done to break the blind belief that those who die in Kashi go to heaven and those who die in Maghar go to hell. This belief was so ingrained that many people would commit suicide in Kashi. To break this belief, Kabir spent his last days in Maghar. He left his body in Maghar. Who can say that Kabir was shackled by Karma?

The story of Kabir's life has more legends and myths than historical facts. A Muslim weaver brought him up. It is said that he was born to an unmarried Brahmin girl. His bringing up had the influences of both Hindu and Muslim faiths. Everyone knows how severely Kabir opposed the hypocrisies and superstitions in both these faiths. The hostility to this was also severe. While some orthodox people tried to kill him, others tried to push him out of Kashi.

Many incidents of Kabir's life came up in Shriram's mind. They were being played in succession and ended with the incident showing Kabir's death. A realization dawned on Shriram that the source of wisdom and intelligence is one's own inner being. Whatever number of scriptures a person reads, they are useless unless wisdom awakens within him. On the other hand, if the inner consciousness awakens, then irrespective of whether the person is literate or not, it carries the capabilities of learning and understanding on its own. The scenes of Kabir's life played like a movie and ended.

Next life – As Samartha Ramdas

After an interval, the scenes of the period (from historical point of view) nearly two hundred years after Kabir started showing up. The region was Maharastra and the time was the barbaric regime of Aurangazeb. At that time, no person or community had the freedom to live according to one's faith. One had to pay a price for his faith. This price could be in the form of money or punishment. Various religions, traditions and in particular Indian streams of *Sadhana* and spirituality had become so weak that people were bent upon fighting amongst themselves. They were bent upon self-destruction.

In that age filled with forces of darkness anddispair, a *Sannyasi* named Samartha Ramdas was born in Maharashtra. Events from that *Sannyasi's* life started unfolding in Shriram's consciousness. Young Ramdas was sitting along with a girl in bridal apparel in the marriage pavilion. The couple was about to get married. Before the ritual of *Saptapadi*, the priest said - 'Now the bride and groom be alert!' This was said so that they could perform the rituals, consciously understanding their import. However the word 'Alert' had a different impact on the would-be groom, Ramdas. His conscience pricked him saying – 'While the entire country and religion is going through bad times, you are worried about getting married and setting up a family' Ramdas listened to his conscience and ran away from the wedding pavilion. He woke up to the happenings of the society. He took *Sanyasa*. Like Parashuram, he started training people in the scriptures as well as the art of warfare.

This personality, who became famous as Samartha Guru Ramdas (1608-1682) did Gayatri *Sadhana* for 12 years at Panchavati, Nasik. After the *sadhana* was completed, he went on a pilgrimage and tried to understand the prevailing conditions of the country. He came back to Maharashtra and prepared a plan to gather the youth who were strong in mind, body and soul. He implemented the plan. Wherever he went, he would build a Hanuman temple and would open an *Akhada* (a kind of gymnasium) with it. Youth used to be trained there in physical exercises, wrestling, and in the use of weapons. This tradition is still seen in Maharashtra and some other parts of the country. They are known as *Ramdasi Akhadas* even now.

In another scene from his life, Shriram saw that Ramdas had gone to meet his mother in the garb of a *Sanyasi*. When he had run away from the wedding, his mother had been devastated by it. Her vision was slowly fading. She remembered her son each moment. When Ramdas returned from his pilgrimage, he searched for his mother and went and bowed before her. His mother who had turned blind recognized her son by the sound of his footsteps. When Ramdas caressed her affectionately, she tried to look at her son. And miraculously, she could see him! The ecstatic mother asked her son – 'Son, it looks like you have gained some miraculous power by which you have brought back my eye sight. Tell me what that power is?'

Samarth forms an organization

Samarth took his mother's blessings and moved on. He involved himself in organizing the monks and the householders. Among the brave hearts who fought for the freedom of the country and its dignity, the name of Chhatrapati Shivaji is the foremost. Shriram saw many scenes of initiating Shivaji, deploying him for the service of the nation and Dharma, and inspiring him to fight against the evil tendencies. In one scene, Ramdas went to Shivaji for alms. Shivaji had established his kingdom by then. The Guru shouted – 'Jai jai Raghuveer Samarth'.

Shivaji heard the call and came down running. For a moment, he wondered what he could offer to his Guru. The next moment, he took a pen and paper and offered his entire kingdom to his Guru. He told his Guru, 'From this day, the kingdom is yours. Please govern this'. Saying this, Shivaji took the oath.

The Guru replied– "Yes. From today, this kingdom is mine. But you manage it on my behalf. Make this kingdom prosperous and offer yourself for awakening this nation." After this, he gave a discourse on how to govern a kingdom, explaining in detail every aspect of governance. This discourse was not only for Shivaji but it serves as a guideline for every ruler who cares about the welfare of his people. Then he taught Shivaji a prayer. In this prayer, the worshipper bows to all the gods remembering the unifying supreme spirit hidden in all of them. This prayer can also be found in Samartha Guru's work 'Dasabodh'. The tone of the prayer was reverberating as if Shriram was himself singing.

Unique Prayer

"O Gajavadana! We bow to you. Your grace is unbounded. You give knowledge and wisdom to all. O Goddess Saraswati! We salute you. You are the source of all speech; only a few enlightened can understand your nature. O Chaturanan (Brahma)! We bow to you. You are great. You created this world and revealed the knowledge through Vedas. O Vishnu! We bow to you. You are protector of this creation. We bow to Lord Shiva who always chants the name of Rama. There is no end to your boons."

"O Indra! You are great. You know what is *Dharma* and *Adharma*. Give us the strength to understand and follow it. O strong Hanuman!

We bow to you. Make us also the worshippers of strength. O Kshetrapal! You have guided many people on the path of Self-realization. O Panduranga! Your place always reverberates with the glory of discourses on God. The glory of Rama and Krishna is infinite. It is due to these avatars that innumerable people followed the path of *upasana*. Yet, the Supreme Soul is the source of all these divine incarnations. All the people on this planet realize this at the end. It manifests itself in many forms and enjoys all the grandeur"

The prayer is long. It addresses the spiritual dimension of powers within us and those that manifest in the world. At the end of the prayer, Samartha Guru Ramdas pulls down the curtains on his incarnation. The aim of his life was to propound the inner truth of Divine life. Various scenes of fulfilling one's responsibilities, leading a principled life and working towards the welfare of the society were seen by Shriram. The message at the end of this incarnation is to strongly establish a powerful Dharma.

Third incarnation – Paramhansa Ramakrishna

The layers of memory unfolded. The new scene began somewhere around Kolkata. The time was the first half of the 19th century. The drama unfolded with a young boy of around the same age as Shriram was now. He came to stay with his elder brother in the Kali temple at Dakshineswar. His name was Ramakrishna. The temple had been constructed by Rani Rasamani who was a *kaivart* by caste. This was considered a lower caste. Even though the Rani's heart was full of devotion, she had to face the brunt of the upper caste people.

People objected to her coming to the temple. They claimed that neither the idol of Kali could be installed there, nor could it be worshipped. Due to this opposition from the so-called learned scholars, no one was ready to take up the position of a priest in this temple. Rani Rasamani approached many ashrams, *gurukuls* and schools. She appealed to many scholars; but they all turned her appeal down. Finally, a Brahmin young man, who lived near Kolkata, by name Ramkumar agreed to become the priest of this temple. He had outraged his relatives by consenting to take up this noble duty.

Ramakrishna also came and stayed with his brother. He would worship the idol with fervent devotion. Overwhelmed by Ramakrishna's devotion and faith, Ramkumar slowly transferred all the responsibilities of the temple to Ramakrishna and himself took up the responsibilities of his Sanskrit *Pathshala*. The ways of the new priest were strange. He treated the idol as though it was alive; as if he was worshipping not a deity, but a living Mother. His conversations would continue as if the Mother replied to him.

Worshipping Kali, Ramakrishna almost lost sense of the physical world. The fame of his intense devotion, his *sadhana* and states of *samadhi* spread far and wide. People came to see him. Slowly, the number of people coming to the temple increased. While his fame spread as an intense devotee and an accomplished saint, he was married off. His wife was sixteen years younger than him, but this relation had nothing to do with the age difference. It was not a relation formed to lead normal married life. The reason of this marriage was to provide affection and to take care of the big group of *sadhaks* and disciples who came to Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna's health was such that he could not take care of even small needs of the *sadhaks*. Even in the initial days, he used to enter the state of *bhavasamadhi*. He would be completely unaware of his physical body when in trance. There would be no movements in the body and an onlooker could easily mistake it to be a dead body. In that state, the Holy Mother Sharadamani took care of Sri Ramakrishna. It was during these days that Sri Ramakrishna took gold coins in one hand and a lump of mud in another. He looked at them and found them to be of equal value and threw them both into the Ganga. Rani Rasamani wanted to become his disciple. She wanted to test him before she took discipleship under him. She tried to seduce him by sending beautiful girls to him. Sri Ramakrishna treated these girls as affectionately as a father treats his daughters. They apologized to him and went back to the Rani.

As part of another test, the Rani spread gold coins on a road and walked with him on that road. Thakur ignored the gold coins and moved on. Even when the Rani indicated them to him, he said that gold is also another form of mud lying useless on the ground. In another occasion, some coins were hidden in a cloth given to Sri Ramakrishna. The moment he touched the cloth, his body received a shock and he withdrew the hand as if he had touched a hot metal. The Rani was convinced that he was indeed a spiritually enlightened saint and accepted him as her Guru.

Practicing different kinds of *Sadhanas* of various spiritual traditions and mastering them was an unprecedented experiment of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. When he began the worship of Shri Rama, he began to behave like Hanuman, and uttering the sacred name of Rama- Raghuveer, he would climb onto trees, pluck fruits, bite into them and throw them away. He stopped the *sadhana* only after reaching a state in which he could see Rama in every creature and in every atom of the universe. Once he started the worship of Shri Krishna through *Sakhi-bhav*. Those who worship Shri Krishna with this feeling begin to see themselves as Gopis and dress like women. Ramakrishna also began to do *sadhana* in a similar manner. To blend into the form of Krishna's '*Sakhi*', he grew his hair and plaited it. He also began to wear a nose ring, applied lampblack to his eyes, applied vermillion and decorated himself with lipstick. In deep states of trance, he would begin to call out loudly- 'Where is Lalita? Where is Vishakha? I am in a pitiable state. Without your grace, I cannot see Radhika and without her, I cannot reach Sri Krishna'.

While doing this *sadhana* as per '*Sakhi Sampradaya*', Sri Ramakrishna began to develop feminine changes in his physical body. His voice began to turn sweet and soft. Nobody could recognize him on hearing his voice. After a few days, even his gait changed. There developed breast-like swellings on his chest and his footsteps were laid softly and carefully like a woman. This state of *sadhana* is evidence that when someone performs worship with complete involvement and passion, the entire personality including the physical features undergoes transformation. After stopping the *sadhana*, with '*Sakhi bhav*', it took months for Thakurji to regain his normalcy.

After having tried the path of devotion, he began the *sadhana* of Vedanta. The pinnacle of this *sadhana* is to reach the state of '*Soham*' and '*Aham Brahmasmi*'. He also tried the *sadhanas* related to various traditions like –*Tantric, Bangala, Baul, Vaishnav*, *Shakta* etc. After having done *sadhanas* belonging to several traditions, he had the concrete realization that even though the paths look different, there is no difference at the fundamental level of the goals. He took initiation into the Khalsa Panth and understood its underlying principles. One day, a thought arose in him to understand what the difference between a Hindu and Muslim was and decided to find out. He took permission of his favorite deity Mother Bhavani to do the experiment on himself. There lived a Sufi saint in the village of Tamtama. He went to the Sufi saint and took initiation into the Sufi way of *sadhana* for himself. After doing the *sadhan*a for 3 days, his entire demeanor changed. He ceased to identify himself as a Hindu. He stopped going to the temple and even refrained from partaking the prasad of Mother Kali. During those days of *sadhana*, somebody said that according to Islam, if one kills a non-Muslim, then he would attain heaven. He asked Ramakrishna if he would kill a non-Muslim. Ramakrishna replied, 'Kafir (non-Muslim) does not reside outside, but is within us. Anger, lust, greed, pride etc are the foreign elements within our being. Only when you destroy them can you obtain the grace of Allah. Only knowledge and power give peace to man. There can be no other beauty or apsara who can give him continuous pleasure and peace.' He also tried the path of Christian form of worship and *sadhana*. After having learnt and understood the secrets of various paths of worship, he got rooted firmly in his own nature. The liberated souls do not have an independent nature of their own. They are so entirely submerged in the consciousness of the Supreme Soul that their ego-based identity becomes acutely sensitive and transparent. Based on the temperament and level of the *sadhak* who approaches them, they appear to the *sadhak* at the same level. They become like a mirror, a crystal idol that merely reflects the form and color of what is present in front of them.

The *Sadhana* Learnt from Totapuri

Sri Ramakrishna continued exploring the various paths of *sadhana*. These scenes were visible to Shriram seated in his *puja* chamber like live transmission. He could see *sadhaks*, *sannyasis*, *fakirs*, Christian missionaries, etc arriving at the temple of Dakshineshwar. One day, a leader of seven hundred *naga sadhus*, a *sanyasi* named Totapuri arrived at the temple premises. His fame had spread far and wide. In the lunar month of Paush, he stayed at Dakshineshwar after completing his holy dip in the Gangasagar. He looked at Sri Ramakrishna and asked – 'Will you do some *sadhana*?'

'If Mother says so, I will do' replied Ramakrishna with child-like innocence. Totapuri thought that he might have to seek the permission of his biological mother, and hence asked him to go to her. Ramakrishna sat in front of Mother Kali and sought her permission. He received an affirmative reply from Her. He again asked Her, 'Who will teach me the *sadhana*?' Mother replied, 'The person who has come to teach you Vedanta will teach you *sadhana* also.' Ramakrishna went and reported the conversation verbatim to Totapuri. He smiled and said, 'If you have to receive teaching from me, then you have to become a *Sannyasi*.' Ramakrishna asked with the same simplicity, 'What has to be done to become a *Sannyasi*?' Shriram seated in the presence of his guiding power, was experiencing all this conversation as though he himself was talking to Totapuri, in the form of Ramakrishna. Totapuri explained to him about *sannyas* and said that he had to perform *shraddha, homa, tarpan,* etc. He would have to wear saffron clothes and be a wandering monk. Ramakrishna replied, 'I accept everything; but can you do something such that I can become a *sannyasi* without wearing saffron clothes. I cannot go to any other place. My mother is alive and she has no other son to take care of her. Hence I cannot leave her alone.'

Totapuri agreed to this. Preparations were made for initiating him into *sannyas*. *Shikha*, sacred thread, rosary etc were given up. Climbing the funeral pyre, *shraaddha, tarpan* etc were also performed. He took the vow to renounce everything. After the initiation, Totapuri imparted spiritual instruction and tried to induce him into the state of *samadhi*. He removed a bead from the rosary and asked Ramakrishna to sit in the lotus pose. Totapuri touched Ramakrishna's forehead, in the middle of the eyebrows, with a crystal. He pressed the crystal a little harder and Ramakrishna entered into the state of *Samadhi*. He became unconscious. The pulse and heart beat were as usual but he was unconscious.

Totapuri was slightly worried at this situation. He was afraid lest Ramakrishna leave his body. He looked after the *sadhak* with utmost care. Two days passed and it was the dawn of the third day, but there was no change in Ramakrishna's condition. Totapuri told his senior disciples that if a *sadhak* does not come back to normal condition within three days, it becomes difficult for the body to receive the soul – consciousness back into itself.

Thakur! You are far Ahead

The disciples said, 'But Gurudev, there are no signs of deterioration on Ramakrishna's body; the breathing pattern is normal; the pulse is beating at the normal rate; there is no indication of decomposition of the body.' Totapuri was not worried. He was however astounded. He did not know what to do. He tried to do everything a Guru could to get his disciple out of *samadhi*, but in vain. He sat back tired and defeated. Instantly something occurred to him and he went close to Ramakrishna's ear and said, 'He for whom you have waited is here.' Ramakrishna sat up instantly as though someone had pulled him up. He became restless and eager and asked, 'Where is He? Where is He?' Totapuri replied, 'He will be reaching here.' He said again, 'Thakur, you are far ahead of me. You are a great being. What I have not been able to attain after 40 years of intense penance, you have attained that state within a day. You are great.' Totapuri was a staunch believer of Vedantic Path. He did not believe in idol worship. After witnessing the miraculous spiritual attainment of his disciple, he bowed to the idol of Mother Kali in Dakshineshwar temple.

The message through which Totapuri got Ramakrishna out of *samadhi* was related to Narendra (Narendranath Dutta who later became famous as Swami Vivekananda). The day Narendra came in contact with Ramakrishna, he hugged him close to his chest. Ramakrishna cried piteously like a parent who had found his long lost son. Narendra was then looking out for employment. At the same time he had an intense aspiration for liberation. This was more intense than his hunger and hence he kept wandering amongst *sadhus*. When he reached Ramakrishna, the Master recognized the disciple and took him into his fold, thus ending his search.

Have You Seen God?

Narendra asked, 'Have you seen God? The reply came instantly, 'Do you want to see?' Narendra had posed this question to innumerable saints and sadhus. Nobody had replied with this kind of assurance and confidence. There were people who said, 'Yes, I have seen', but there was no conviction in their words. There were others who said that if they admit that they have seen God, then it would be like advertising their status, and if they did not reply in the affirmative, then the reply would be wrong. Hence they preferred to keep mum. They merely asked Narendra to express his doubts and that they would try to remove them.

Narendra had asked the same question to Maharishi Debendranath Tagore, the father of poet Rabindranath Tagore. Maharishi Debendranath was relaxing in a round-bottomed boat afloat in the river. Narendranath jumped into the river and swam to the boat. He asked the Maharishi about God the moment he climbed on to the boat. Maharishi was taken aback by Narendra's question. He felt as though someone was holding his collar and demanding an answer. Narendra had just expressed his desire eagerly and had no intention of scaring anyone, but his eagerness had startled a Yogi. Maharishi said, 'Why don't you take a seat first. Sit peacefully and I will reply to your question.' This behaviour itself made Narendra feel that his answer could not be found here. So, Narendra returned from there saying – 'You need not reply; I have got the answer'

Narendra's quest for God ended at the doorstep of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. He said to Narendra, 'Whatever you have to ask, go and ask the Mother. Don't tell me anything.' When Ramakrishna made this offer, Narendra's mind was filled with the worries of his familial responsibities. However, he did go and stood in front of the Mother's idol at the behest of his Guru, but could not ask for any worldly boon from Her. He was so engrossed in looking at the charming form of Mother Kali that he forgot about asking for anything. He went back without expressing any desire. Ramakrishna sent him to the temple two more times. Narendra came back in the same manner both the times. The Guru said, 'Do the work of Mother and she will herself take care of you. Your family will never feel lack of their essential needs.'

Thakur left his mortal body five years after meeting Narendra. Leaving his body was also like a part of the Divine play. One day, he told a disciple, 'Listen to me. I will not be able to talk to people anymore. Hence, I have requested Mother to give power to Narendra, Raja (Rakhal Maharaj), Tarak, Babu (Baburam), Yogin, Shashi and other disciples. From now onwards, these people will impart spiritual instructions to devotees'. Ramakrishna experienced throat pain a few days after making this announcement. The pain increased so much that he could hardly swallow anything. The disease became more severe. When devotees suggested treatment, Ramakrishna replied, 'This is Mother's desire. If She wants, the disease will be cured. Otherwise, no amount of treatment will restore my health.'

The Curtain Falls (*Leela Samvaran*)

The real reason behind not undergoing treatment was the cruelty involved in the preparation of medicines. Devotees suggested that he use medicines in the preparations of which the cruelty to animals was not involved. Thus Homeopathy and Ayurvedic treatment was started. There was no improvement even then. His condition began to deteriorate further. One day, Thakur said, 'If the disease cannot be cured, then what is the need to take all this trouble? Why should I trouble the Mother?' That day, Thakur did not even eat his meals. He returned the plate sent by Mother Sharadamani. She asked the disciples to have courage and said that Thakur had decided to leave his mortal sheath. It was the day of 16th August. Ramakrishna appeared normal all day. He ate a sumptuous meal in the evening. After it was past midnight, around 1 AM, in the night, he decided to pull the curtain of the divine play. His disciples took a vow to shoulder the responsibilities given to each of them and then the mortal remains were buried with great love and devotion.

Shriram seated in the *puja* room was witnessing and traveling through these scenes in silence. When he regained normal consciousness, he saw his angelic guide in front of him. He felt fatigued as he came out of his memories. The Master extended his right hand and placed his thumb in between Shriram's eyebrows and the other four fingers on the top of his head, which in spiritual parlance, is known as the seat of

Sahasrar Chakra or *Brahma Randhra.* This touch of his master removed all disturbances from the mind of Shriram. His being was filled with renewed enthusiasm. A new world presented itself before him. In that world, apart from Gurudev and himself, he experienced the divine light enveloping the *puja* room, and a divine fragrance spreading in the room.

The Command of the Guiding Light

"One who was Kabir, one who was Ramdas and one who was Ramakrishna, you are that. This inner vision has been revealed to you with a view to energize you and not to astound you." The lips of his guide who was visible in his luminous form, moved. The vibrations through which the command was being communicated had no sound. It cannot be called *para vani* also because movement of lips is not necessary while communicating in *para vani.* The *pashyanti vani* that originates from the navel or the heart is audible to only that person for whom it is intended. Gurudev was telling, "For now, there is only one inspiration that I give you. Take it as a command. The essence is – Single-pointed intense *Sadhaňa*"

A doubt arose in the mind of Shriram. This can be called curiosity also. But in his first meeting itself Shriram had developed such an intimacy with his Gurudev that he did not hesitate to ask an odd question. Shriram who was seated in *sadhana* asked his guide, "I did not go in search of you. Why did you search for me and then give me the mandate of *sadhana*? What kind of *sadhana* is it?" saying this, a subtle smile played on Shriram's lips.

The divine guide also smiled back. His smile was clearly visible from beneath his dense and long moustache. He said, "The Guru always searches for the disciple and not vice-versa. You have completed the journey of several of your previous births along with this body of mine. You have walked holding its hands. Now that you have grown up and have reached a state of undertaking the journey, I am again holding you." Whenever the Divine luminous being referred to the 'body', he indicated towards his own self.

"This is your divine birth. I will help and guide you in this life, too. I will make you do everything that is required for establishing the *Yugdharma.*" It was as though the divine being had already decided the course for Shriram's life. He continued, "Based on what the Almighty expects each being to accomplish, He would have provided the necessary strength and resources beforehand to achieve the task. But these resources are not obtained without adequate effort. For that, it is essential to do sustained *sadhana*.

"From today and from this very moment, resolve to take up a special *sadhana*. One phase of the *sadhana* is to perform a series of Gayatri *Mahapurashcharans* for the duration of 24 years. You have to complete a *Mahapurascharan* of doing the *Japa* of 24 lakhs of Gayatri *Mahamantra* in one year. In addition to various restrictions on food and life-style, there is a strict discipline of *tapascharya* that needs to be followed. The rules have already been decided. You have to eat bread made of barley flour with buttermilk. Eat only as much as is required to maintain the body. Do not pay heed to taste, aroma or even to nutritional content of the food. The health and vigor needed by you to complete the assigned task will be given by Divine Powers."

Intense *Tapa* Commenced

The process of worship that was outlined was bound to take six hours per day. The day when Shriram engaged himself to do the *sadhana* was the auspicious day of *Vasant Panchami*. His regular *sadhana* for the day was complete. Only the rituals of *Jap nivedan* and *visarjan* were remaining. Shriram started the new *sadhana* as recommended by Gurudev. To complete twenty four lakhs of *Japa* in one year, one has to complete sixty-six *malas* of *Jap* per day (this would mean reciting Gayatri mantra nearly seven thousand times a day). That day he remained seated for five hours after sunrise to complete the assigned *Jap*.

He did not know when the *Japa* was completed. During the *japa* and meditation of the *Savita* (rising Sun), various questions arose regarding the *sadhana*. He did not have to search for words to frame his questions. The questions were transmitted automatically and they were answered in the presence of the divine guide. There was a curiosity as to where Gurudev resided. The answer came that he lived in the heart of the Himalaya. Nobody with a normal body could reach that region. There are limitations of the physical body. To reach the place that is called as heart of the Himalaya is an impossible task for a normal person. It is even difficult to reach there with a normal subtle body too.

In the later phase of the reply, it got clarified that the physical body of Gurudev was hundreds of years old. The history of his body is not known to anyone. Only the work taken up by that body stands as a testimony to it. History is being searched but even today that task is incomplete. According to some evidence, his physical body is said to be six hundred fifty to seven hundred years old. According to some others, it is older than 2500 years. On the first day of the *anushthan* itself Shriram felt the desire to know more of his Guru, but he heard only silence in reply. There was only one realization that was floating in that silence; and it was that he was a symbol of *Nirvikar Anand* (pure bliss) of the *Eeshwar* (Lord) of *Sarva* (all). Those *sadhaks* and *siddhas* who gave evidences of their subtle presence in the Himalaya told that Gurudev's name was Swami Sarveshwarananda.

The Limitations of the Physical Body and its Necessity

Gurudev seemed to tell – 'The physical body can work only upto a certain limit. However great and strong the physical body might be it cannot accomplish divine tasks. For divine purposes, it is essential to get firmly established in subtle state of the body. The objective of intense penance is to take the physical body to the subtle state.'

There arose a question that if there was no special use of the physical body, then why should it be retained? Why should it not be transformed directly into the subtle state? The answer to this question also appeared to come from his own heart. 'Physical body has its own importance. It is true that much of the physical energy is expended in fulfilling the needs of the body. Disease, illness, weakness and old age do not let the body work to its full capacity. The greater part of the physical energy is spent in preserving the physical body. Even then, it is useful because all the tasks that are visible to the eyes can be accomplished through the physical body alone'.

'Is it possible to reach the place where Gurudev resides?' This question arose in the mind and the answer came back immediately. It would be incorrect to say that the answer came immediately. It was as though the answer came along with the question itself. The realm of consciousness is not bound by time; hence it is possible that the answer came before the question itself. The reply was, "You will be introduced to *Devatma* Himalaya also at the appropriate time. It is just the difficulty posed by the body you have today; otherwise you should have known that you are a resident of that place. You have been sent here for accomplishing a very special task. You have to complete worldly tasks and hence have been covered with a garment of the physical body."

"This place which is the heart of the Himalaya is located near Kailash. It is however not the same Kailash that people show on the map. The Kailash of divine souls is altogether different and unique. Saints and Mahatmas live in the vicinity of Gomukh. There is also a suitable place near Kedar region for them. They prepare themselves to enter the subtle worlds from there. All of them do not manage to reach. Only one or two succeed. It is like what is said in Bhagavad Gita – Only one among thousands of people tries to attain self realization; and among those who attempt, only one succeeds.

"The same is applicable when it comes to going to the heart of Himalaya which is the heart of spiritual consciousness of the Earth. After you have successfully completed the routine of *sadhana* as outlined, you will be called there. You will then have to stay there for four days. I will be with you in the form of your guide. After assuming a subtle form, it is not difficult to travel anywhere or to enter anywhere. Such a facility will be created for you. After the first experience you will realize how efficient and capable the subtle form is. After experiencing the power of both the bodies, you will find it easier. You will then be able to understand how the *rishis* fulfill their divinely assigned missions. In the company of those great sages, you will be able to awaken the powers required for completing the great task given to you."

Two More Special Responsibilities

The same day on which *Purashcharan sadhana* was advised, two other responsibilities were given. Though they were part of *Mahanushthan*, they were more mundane in nature. The inspiration was, "You should resist whatever is wrong in society. You have to prepare people by coaching them to fight against all evils in the society. God wants to liberate India from foreign rule; it is time for the dark forces to take a back-seat. The Lord desires that India should play a new role in the world. The coming centuries will establish India on the pedestal of respect and glory. For this to happen, India should become independent. It is because of divine inspiration that we see a surge of emotions among the masses to get freedom. You should take part in the struggle for freedom. Wherever necessary, resort to active resistance. In ordinary situations, use your pen and voice to prepare the people. There might be other means of transmitting God's message. Try to use all of them."

When this message was being received from Gurudev, other thoughts were also popping out in Shriram's mind. The Divine inspiration put a stop to all those thoughts from proceeding further. Then there came a reply to his thoughts, "God can easily generate the inspiration to free themselves from foreign rule in the minds of the people as naturally as the breathing process, but his actual plan is to prepare the people through sustained mass efforts. In the war of righteousness that will be waged in the coming days, all kinds of people should take part. It is not necessary that all of them are great warriors. People (who are rhetorically like monkeys, bears, squirrels and other not-so-great creatures) will also have to take part. All roles big-small, good-bad have already been decided for both armies in the war. The victory and defeat has also been decided. You just have to ensure that the message reaches the masses. Don't think how you can do it alone? You will find a large group of helpers and associates waiting for you. The group will expand with time and you have to guide them."

The plan for participation in freedom movement and educating the masses had almost been finalized. During this period, the flow of thoughts and the company of the guiding light were constantly felt. The mind would at times get engrossed in the meditation of *Savita* or at times would feel that mind itself had been submerged in the brilliance, as though everything had been burnt to ashes. After a few moments, it would begin to be aware of its individual consciousness. But it would appear to be much more mature and capable than it was before the meditation. It was as though the contents of consciousness have undergone a transformation.

Mother's Complaint

During this period mother (Taiji) had peeped into the *puja* room several times. Everyday Shriram used to complete his *sandhya* before the sun changed its red hues. "What has happened today? *Sandhyavandan* has not been completed yet? Is it possible that he has entered into the state of *Samadhi* as it happened earlier? Then Shriram's father was alive and could get him out of *Samadhi*? Now, if he has reached a similar state, who will get him out of it?" Several thoughts and worries began to emerge in Taiji's mind. Inside the room Shriram was experiencing the presence of his guiding light in front of him as he began his new process of *sadhana*. Body, mind, and soul were bathed in the bliss of his divine presence.

"Are you going to sit in the room all day? Let the Divine Mother take some rest." These words of the mother brought his consciousness to the real world. After peeping into the room several times during the day, the mother could not stay quiet. She tried to wake up her son in her own way and Shriram tried to get up. When mother saw her beloved son get up, she went away. Shriram added some more ghee in the *Deepak* (lamp) that was kept at the altar of worship. Till now the routine was that after the completion of *puja*, the lamp used to be left as such. When ghee would get used up completely, the flame would get extinguished. The meaning of adding ghee was to keep the lamp burning continuously. The instruction given by Gurudev was being put into practice. Along with *Mahapurashcharan sadhana*, *Akhand Jyoti* also descended in the *Deepak* on that day of *Vasant Panchami*. Since then, the "*Akhand Deepak*" has been kept alight. In course of time, it had traveled to Agra and Mathura. It was installed in Shantikunj, Haridwar in the year 1971.

Shriram prostrated to the Divine Mother but did not do the *visarjan* (concluding ritual). In regular *sandhyavandan*, Gayatri is invoked during *Jap* and then *visarjan* is also done. But in *Mahapurashcharan*, there is no need to do *visarjan* because it is a continuous and unbroken form of worship. Daily worship is like a chapter that is completed in a day, while *Mahapurashcharan* is like continuous reading of a mammoth book which has innumerable chapters. One needs lot of time to understand all this. When *visarjan* is not done, the process of worship of divine deities is continuous and their living presence is always tangible. Extreme care has to be taken that actions, thoughts and manner of living are kept in tune with their presence. The establishment of *Akhand Deepak* and its continuity was a physical evidence of the presence of those subtle forces.

When he stepped out of the Puja room, his mother reproached him gently, "What were you talking to Mother Gayatri for so long? Will you give her some respite or not?" Saying this, her face was filled with loving tenderness towards her son. Somewhere there were also pride and happiness reflecting from her being - that her son was preparing to continue the tradition of his ancestors. According to her the next stage of *puja* was nothing other than becoming a *purohit* or conduct *katha*. Shriram did not try to give a reply but was silently engrossed in his thoughts. Mother asked again, "What did Mother Gayatri say? What did you beseech from her after your long worship?"

"I did not beseech anything", said Shriram. "While doing *sandhyavandan*, my Gurudev appeared before me. He outlined the future path of my life and instructed me on what is to be done next. I have to walk on the path he has set for me."

"What path has he shown you? Hope you will not be breaking your word if you share it with me. Has your Gurudev asked you to become a *sanyas*i?" Taiji was getting anxious. Shriram gave her an assuring reply: "No, mother. Gurudev has asked me to stay with you and do *sadhana*. I will do *Jap-dhyan* for about 5-6 hours a day. Gurudev has said that I will have to do this *sadhana* for 24 years. My diet will consist of buttermilk and bread of barley. The lamp in the puja room should be kept burning incessantly. It should always remain filled with ghee."

The Announcement of Lighting the *Akhand Deep*

"Why just 24 years, do *sadhana* for the whole of your life. I just want that you stay with me. Never leave me and go away." Taiji replied in a relieved tone. Then she was lost in thought for some time. Suddenly, a thrill of delight passed through her being. Maybe it was due to a pleasant thought or idea. She called Shriram and in the same vein began to say, "If the lamp has to be kept burning continuously, special attention has to be paid at all times by adding ghee to it whenever required. I will not be able to take full-time care of this activity."

Shriram was listening to Taiji's words carefully and he had also noted the joyous rapture on her face. Taiji continued after a few moments and said, "You have reached the age of marriage. If you marry, the daughter-in-law will take care of *Akhand Deep* and also assist me in household work."

Shriram did not say anything. His mother took it as a silent assent. Internally she was preparing to use her authority in case Shriram refused to the proposal. But such an opportunity did not arise. That very day, Taiji told her family and relatives to suggest a suitable girl for Shriram. Shriram was always aware of what Taiji was doing and bearing these in mind, he planned future activities. After conversing with his mother, he went to the cow-shed and chose a *Kapila* (grey colored) cow for service. In this choice, the resolve to use only the ghee and buttermilk made out of the milk of *Kapila* cow played a decisive role.

He collected the dung of *Kapila* cow and smeared the floor of *puja* room with it. Though his mother observed his activity, she did not say anything. Had it been any other day, she would not have let Shriram do this work. But today, it was different. He had done *sadhana* for 5-6 hours and had obtained the instructions of his Gurudev to do *sadhana* for 24 years. She did not want to intervene in any of his activities. She knew that if she came forward to manage the *puja* room, her son would not agree. She stopped and kept hovering around him so that she could assist him, if required. But Shriram was totally engrossed in arranging his *puja* room as though he was in a deep *Samadhi*. He was not aware of who was coming or going or what anyone else was doing.

After having resolved that the lamp will burn incessantly, he transferred the wick to a bigger lamp. That day, he himself took complete care of the lamp. After some practice, he did not have to worry too much about it. Shriram spent more time than usual during the evening *sandhyavandan* too. He was seated in *Jap* for about 2 hours. That morning and evening of *Vasant Panchami* created a new page in the history of not only Shriram but the entire world.

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On the Path of Sadhana - Aradhana

The Kashi Session

The period around 1925   1926 was a time of intense churning, agitation and introspection in the country. The resolve to be free from the clutches of foreign rule was taking shape in the minds of people. People of backward castes and dalits neither had the right to enter a temple nor seek education. They were even prohibited from drawing water from public wells. They could not sit with those of the upper castes and they would be punished if they walked around an upper caste person with their head held high. Analyzing the decay that had set in the society, great men like Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Swami Shraddhanand, Rajendra Prasad and many others had said that Hindu society would be strengthened only when the society removes the blot of untouchability and treats the dalits and people of backward castes with respect. Indians would never become free as long as the society was divided into various castes and sub-castes. Mahatma Gandhi was raising this issue at every platform. His fame was growing as the indisputable leader of the people. His voice was important, but Malaviyaji was approaching this in a different manner. He was attempting to bring about the changes by creating a desire for change in the society. He was held in high esteem by scholars, priests and teachers. He himself was an expert in the scriptures. One could see a social leader and a great man with a vast perspective in Gandhiji. Malaviya, in addition to possessing all these qualities, had also the strength of living tradition behind him.

In 1923, a session of Hindu Mahasabha was held at Kashi. Then, that organization was a platform for all streams and sects of Hindu Dharma. Malaviyaji presided over this session. Due to the efforts of Malaviyaji, a resolution was passed in this session recognizing the rights of dalits to study in government and private schools, draw water from wells, bathe in ponds, share the seats with others during functions, walk on the streets and enter the temples. The resolution called upon everyone to recognize their rights. The resolution was carried through, but implementing it in the society was a tough task. That was a separate battle. Yet, to pass this resolution successfully in Kashi in the presence of hundreds of priests and scholars was in itself a great achievement.

Lala Lajpat Rai presided over the 1925 session of the Hindu Mahasabha. This session was held in the city of intellectuals and orthodox people – Calcutta (now Kolkata). Lala Lajpat Rai raised the question of the rights of untouchables and *Shudras* to study the Vedas. As soon as this question was raised, there was commotion in the session. Tension rose up at the venue. Malaviyaji was present at the session. He took control over the situation and said – "The gifts of God are for everyone. No one is forbidden from learning the Vedas, but it required a strong *Tapasya*. Not everyone can however be able to observe the stringent requirements needed for *tapasya*. Instead, all such people who cannot follow the tough requirements can learn the important principles by the study of Gita. Bhagavad Gita is the greatest scripture on earth. Everyone can understand it."

Malaviyaji managed to cool the tempers during the session. He believed in the equal rights to everyone in the society. His point was that dividing the society into superior and inferior groups in the areas of *Sadhana* and learning had made the Hindu society hollow. After dousing the flared tempers in the Calcutta session, Malaviyaji traveled across the country rousing nationalistic sentiments. While activating the nationalistic movement, he was at the same time energizing the social reforms. His speeches would address the topics of improving the conditions of the untouchables and women, to uproot the evil practices in the society. He also raised the matter of the rights of *Shudras* to study Vedas during these speeches. In the year 1927, he took a courageous step and gave *Mantra Deeksha* to people of all castes across the society in Prayag. This action of his was debated widely and there were both support and opposition to it. Malaviyaji did not care about the comments he received. He remained calm, untroubled and resolute; and continued with his work. There were more collective *mantra deekshas* at Calcutta, Nasik, Pune, Kashi and other places. The support and opposition continued.

Samaj Anushthan (Social Service)

Prior to collective *Mantra Deeksha* program in Prayag, Malaviyaji visited Agra. Even after having met his divine guide, and starting the *Maha Purashcharanas*, Shriram took interest in the social activities as before. He used to listen carefully whenever he received any information about Malaviyaji's activities. He would then make a plan how he could cooperate in his *Samaj Anushthan*. After the 1926 *Vasant Parva*, he looked back at his activities before his initiation. In the light of all that had happened in the past 3 years, he chose some responsibilities for himself.

When he heard that Malaviyaji was visiting Agra, Shriram decided that he would go to Agra. Saying that he would be back in a couple of days, he left for Agra. Malaviyaji was staying at Hindu Sabha Bhavan in Agra. Actually, this building belonged to Seth Girdhar Das who had let it out for holding the activities of Hindu Sabha. As this building was primarily used for social work, it came to be known as Hindu Sabha Bhavan. Malaviyaji addressed the volunteers in this building. He said that Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were parts of the big Hindu Dharma. He said – "Setup small organizations in all villages. Those whom we call untouchables are our brothers. Focus on improving their conditions. Adopt them into the mainstream of the society." He also inspired the young workers to start schools and *Akhadas* at all places. He said – 'One should be strong in the body also. Only when one has strength coan one fight with both internal and external enemies. A strong soul resides only in a strong body. To strengthen the mind, involve yourself in worship, meditation and study of scriptures'.

The emphasis of the speech was on building afresh the worn-out Hindu society. Even in personal discussions, he would stress on improving the condition of untouchables. After the public speech, he was talking to the volunteers. Someone asked – "Is not your idea of working on removing untouchability at variance with the nationalistic movement? Would it not dilute the intensity by focusing on two aims? We would then end up forgetting the primary aim."

Malaviyaji asked – "What is the primary aim?" The questioner answered –"Independence" Malaviyaji asked again "Why do you seek independence?" The questioner also had come fully prepared. He said

"We seek independence so that we can walk with our heads held high in the world; so that we can protect our dignity and respect". Malaviyaji understood the mindset of the questioner. He continued this discussion further and said "We should not try to seek dignity and respect for the individual. We should seek it for the entire country. We need freedom for this. We should not forget that we cannot earn respect for the country while we crush our brethren. By establishing their dignity, we can restore the respect to the entire country."

He also proposed a way of synthesizing the two. "When one is ill, everyone focuses on curing the disease. However, medicine is not the food. Temporary reforms are not the need of the hour. The reforms should have visible results. We should not do anything that would be in opposition to the freedom movement. Yet, if we do not improve the conditions of the untouchables, we will not be able to include them into the mainstream of the society."

Meeting the *Deeksha Guru* Again

After listening to the speech of Malaviyaji, Shriram had joined the private discussion also. He saluted Malaviyaji and sat in one corner. Many other people were also present in the discussion, and most of them were the youth. Everyone introduced himself and Shriram also did the same. As he was introducing himself, Malaviyaji remembered him as Pandit Roopkishore's son whom he had initiated a few years back. He also remembered that the young boy had shown signs of a promising future and that he would do something extraordinary for the country and society.

One of the assembled youth spoke of how Shriram had taken care of an untouchable old lady in his village and how he had to suffer punishment for the same. Malaviyaji wanted to listen to this story from Shriram himself. Shriram explained all that had happened. He also asked what Shriram's thoughts were when he served the old lady. Listening to what Shriram said, he was very happy and praised Shriram for this act and said – "You will have to face many other challenges in the future." In this visit, apart from these topics there were no discussions on any other topics of significance. All discussions were centered around social reforms and the freedom movement. Shriram had the opportunity to listen to wide-ranging discussions between freedom fighters, social workers and others. These discussions helped Shriram to choose his calling. While others were discussing amongst themselves, he was deciding what he should do on reaching Anwalkheda.

On reaching Anwalkheda, he called the meeting of his young army. He explained to all of them about his Agra trip. He also described how in spite of Agra being the cantonment area people were still fighting for freedom without fear. Usually, people were afraid of the army, but the youth there had the courage. They were always ready to fight against any atrocities. A youth Ramprasad said – "We too are ready Shriram. Don't you remember how we had troubled the English officer and his Indian soldiers?"

Shriram replied – "That was in the village. It requires more courage to fight in the cantonment. We have to learn from them." Ramprasad opposed this advice. He felt that Shriram's opinion that the village boys were less courageous was unfair. He asked – "How can you say that? Did you yourself not break an English officer's head?" and everyone agreed with Ramprasad. The incident had happened in 1923. Shriram was twelve years old. He had been to Agra. There, an English officer was teasing a young lady. He was intimidating the girl to come near him. The girl was smart. She understood what the intention of the officer was. Instead of going towards him, she silently walked away swiftly from him. Seeing her moving away, the officer started scolding her. A young man with the girl asked – "What is the matter?" The officer felt that this questioning was an affront and it had to be punished. He hit the young man on his back with the butt of his rifle and the young man fell down. Leaving him fallen, the officer ran behind the girl. She tried to run away and the Englishman started chasing her. Shriram was standing at one of the shops. When he saw all this, his blood boiled with anger against the officer and also the people who were watching all this silently. He took a big stone which was used as a door stopper of the shop, aimed well and hit the officer on the head. The officer fell down immediately. He tried to get up, but his legs felt weak. He started walking with a wobble and started shouting at all people. The people were silent spectators and did not say who threw the stone. The officer threatened the people, yet no one spoke up. Meanwhile, the young lady had reached a safe place. The English officer went back. The members of Shriram's group remembered this incident as it was after this incident that Shriram organized his army of young boys.

After meeting Malaviyaji, Shriram started planning with increased vigor. Some activities were planned. His personal *sadhana* was on course. It just needed four-five hours extra every day. He managed this by cutting down his sleep time. His mother would arrange for cow's ghee, buttermilk and bread of barley. She would also ensure that the *Akhand Deepak* was always filled with ghee. Her longing for Shriram's marriage was increasing day by day. When Shriram's outdoor activities of collecting the boys of the village and doing rounds of meetings, distributing pamphlets and sticking posters, etc increased, his moth[illegible] desire became still more intense. She asked some of her relatives to look for a suitable bride and the responses started coming in. Taiji asked him to choose one and tell her. Shriram thought for some time and said – "What is the hurry? It would be against the *Dharma* to marry at this age"

Search for Soul-mate

Taiji asked – "All the boys in the village marry at the age of 14-15. Many boys in your group are also married. Why don't you too marry?" Shriram kept quiet. When his mother insisted, Shriram said – "Mother, please wait for some time." His mother asked – "How long?" The son replied – "About a year" When the mother asked for the reason, Shriram said – "Malaviyaji says that boys should not marry till the age of sixteen. Actually, it is better that marriage happens after 21-22 years, but we have to wait till 16."

On hearing Malaviya ji's name, his mother backed off. She asked – "What should be the girl's age for marriage?" Shriram answered – "The girl should be at least 12-year old. I know that you need some help in maintaining the *Akhand Deep* and to take care of the cows, but we should respect what is said in the scriptures."

Taiji did not argue. She said – "You can at least choose a girl". Shriram replied – "You take care of it. You need a daughter-in-law, so you search and decide." When Shriram gave 16 years as the right age, there was a reason behind it. In those days, girls as young as 8 -10 years old were considered old enough to be married off. In some communities, a girl who was unmarried at this age was considered a headache. Boys were considered old enough for marriage at 10-11 years of age.

This tradition of child marriage would rob the girls and boys of their youth. When Malaviyaji started campaigning for building a strong and organized Hindu society, he also focused on the curse of child marriages. He created a 3-point agenda of emancipation of the untouchables, *shuddhi pratha* (purification tradition) and respect to women. With this, he started working on discouraging child marriages. In the conventions of 1923 in Kashi and 1924 in Prayag, he gathered scholars and took their opinion on social reforms. They all agreed that a girl should be at least twelve and the groom sixteen to be considered eligible for marriage. It would be better if the boy was twenty and the girl sixteen.

In the context of those days, deciding on a minimum age for marriage was a great revolutionary step. This created a furore in the society. Some scholars opposed it. The minimum age was not accepted immediately. Only a few started following Malaviyaji's guidance. Shriram was the first to follow this new custom in Anwalkheda. He made it clear to his mother that whoever was the bride, she should be at least twelve years old. He wanted to wait for four more years, but he saw that there was a need for companion who would take care of the activities of the house and in particular the maintenance of the *Akhand Deepak*. His mother had other tasks to look after. Her entire day passed in managing the big family. So he thought of giving this responsibility to his wife. She could take care of the cow and prepare ghee for *puja* and butter milk for his food in a better way. Therefore, Shriram agreed to marry as he wanted a wife who would be a companion on his path of *sadhana;* and not for setting up a family and having children.

Arrival of His Companion in *Sadhana*

Shriram completed sixteen years in September 1927. His mother's maternal relations proposed the name of Pandit Roopram Sharma's daughter at Barsoli (Aligarh). Her name was Saraswati Devi. Taiji immediately went with her brother to see her prospective daughter-in-law. The first question she asked when she saw Saraswati Devi in Barsoli was, "Daughter, can you serve Gomata (cow)?" The girl did not reply. She kept her eyes lowered in shyness. Roopram replied, "You have asked very well, sister. She does not enjoy anything other than serving the cows." Taiji did not ask anything about her capabilities in managing a house-hold or about her nature. Taiji believed - "The girls can be molded into any set-up. They are not bad by nature and they are also devoid of any undesirable tendencies. The daughter-in-law is spoiled by the in-law's family by treating her as an outsider"

Pandit Roopram and a couple of other relatives visited Aanwalkheda. They saw Shriram. Ancestral property was so much that nobody needed to worry about finances. He liked Shriram's interest in devotional activities. Roopram loved the temple-like atmosphere in Shriram's Puja room. He said, "My daughter also loves these religious activities. She worships Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati daily. She started this when she was barely 5 years old." After saying this, Pt. Roopram paused. He did not like Shriram participating in the *Bal Sena* activities or in the independence movement. He raised objection and said, "It is slightly risky to move with Congress people and to run a revolutionary movement. Anything can happen tomorrow. What will my daughter do then?"

Taiji overruled his objection by saying, “For that matter, any time anything can happen with anybody. What will you do then? Starting from Malaviyaji and Gandhiji, everybody is participating in the Independence movement. People holding high positions in Agra and Mathura are also part of the movement. It is a matter of pride to all of us.” Roopram was convinced after hearing Taiji’s reply.

The ritual of confirming the matrimonial match was completed. The date of wedding was also decided. On the full moon day of the month of *Kartik*, twelve people from Aanwalkheda went as the marriage party. The marriage was conducted in a simple manner that is prescribed in the scriptures as ‘*Braahma Vivah*’. Two cows and two pairs of clothes were given in the form of dowry. The guests enjoyed good hospitality from the bride’s family. But there was no pomp and show. No feast was arranged. There were twenty - twenty five families of the same community in their village. They were invited for the reception. Roopram was very well-off. He was capable of throwing a feast to several villages. He would not have left any stone unturned in celebrating his daughter’s wedding in pomp. But when the wedding was decided, Taiji had spoken in clear words that there should be no squandering of money on this auspicious occasion and that the wedding should be conducted in an austere manner.

Japa Even after the Marriage

After returning to Aanwalkheda, Shriram’s routine continued in its usual manner. It took four days for the various wedding rituals to be completed. During this time, he could not complete the required *Jap*. He could sit only for about three to three-and-a -half hours on all these four days. For completing the pending *Jap*, Shriram did not do anything else for the next three days. He just sat for *Jap*. He did not come out of the *puja* room for anything other than taking bath, meals, etc. On the fourth day, when the *Jap* was completed, he felt relieved. The wife came and bowed at his feet. He looked at her. Right from the day, she had entered the house as his wife; she had been offering her respects to him. But she did not get a chance to touch his feet because Shriram confined himself to the *puja* room all these days. The new bride used to see him from a distance and offer her respects. Finally, on the fourth day, she got a chance to touch his feet.

Taiji was busy in some inner room. Shriram asked his wife to sit. When she turned to the floor to sit, Shriram immediately said, "Please do not sit on the floor" and offered her a seat. She sat there hesitatingly. He began to ask questions like, "Are you feeling alright here? Is there any inconvenience? You have been married and have come here. Destiny had decided our wedding and so it happened. But going forward, you might have to face many difficulties. God has given me such responsibilities to fulfill that I might not be able to manage the household activities very well. I might even not be able to pay much attention to you. Prepare your mind to face such situations."

Saraswati Devi replied, "These things should have been decided before the wedding. Why now?" On hearing these words, Shriram felt a tone of accusation in her voice, but it was not so. She continued, "It was the will of the Lord that my father married me and sent me here. Lord Bholenath has commanded that I fulfill my duties with you. I do not know what happiness or difficulties I will face in the future. I will just be happy in discharging my *dharma* well."

Shriram asked, "What is your *dharma*?" The reply came, "Being your wife, my *dharma* is to serve your feet. It is my great fortune that you are a great *tapasvi* and a devotee of the Lord. It is as though I have found my chosen deity Shiva in your form." After having understood his wife's mind and reassurance, he felt relieved. He had felt that she will have a tough time in dealing with a husband like him. But that was not the case at all.

On seeing Taiji coming towards the room, the new bride got up from her seat and went inside to do her work. Taiji said, "Her maternal family is coming to take her home. It is only natural that the daughter goes to her home for a while." Shriram did not reply. He simply got up and went out. He began searching for his *Bal Sena* members. They were scattered because contact could not be maintained for a few days. No new program had been conducted. They were just pasting the stickers that were already made in nearby villages. By word of mouth, he was able to send a message to all members.

Anyone Who is Ill Deserves Help

Everybody gathered on the next day. They shared with one other the information of the happenings during the past few days. Nothing special had happened in the past eight days. Shriram suddenly remembered Hubba uncle who was a *Patwari* (registrar of village land records). In those days this post was hereditary. The father would make his son a *Patwari* and quit his work. Hubbalal had become a *Patwari* in that manner. But there was nobody to continue to hold the position after him.

When Hubbalal was in power, he had made villagers' life difficult. Each atom of his being was filled with greed and oppression. There was no one to stop him and hence in his greed he had not left any villager in peace. He used to send notices to people every other day. To instill fear in others, he showed wrong records on land and would complain to the *Tahsildar* and write a report that favored him and brought police into the scene. Many villagers had to let go of their property owing to his machinations. There were many rich people who were brought onto the road because of him. When Hubbalal fell ill, people said, "God is punishing him for his evil deeds" Hubbalal had been struck by paralysis. For a few days, nobody even knew about his illness. When they knew about it, all of them washed their hands off cursing him to suffer for his past evil doings.

The leader, Shriram was of the opinion that – "It is the duty of the villagers to take care of any grief-stricken or diseased person who does not have anyone to tend him. Even if someone is ill-tempered in the family, the family takes care of him when he falls sick." He did not try to convince the villagers but presented this argument to his army of youngsters.

There was a meeting of the *Bal Sena*. Shriram said, "Let us first go and see him. We will discuss other things later." They saw Hubbalal lying on the cot staring at the door with distress hoping that someone would come and enquire about his wellbeing. When he remembered his evil deeds, the hope that somebody would come to help him would disappear into thin air. Even then, he somehow nurtured the hope that someone would come to see him. The door was open. Shriram and his friends did not have to knock at the door. It was as though Hubbalal was waiting for them. His eyes shone brightly on seeing the boys. The shine lasted for some time and then the eyes were filled with tears. He began to say, "I am getting punished for my sins. Who knows how many people I have harmed and how many families I have disrupted?"

Shriram said, "Don't worry uncle. Everything will be fine." They convinced him and immediately busied themselves in taking care of him. There was no one to look after the house and hence it was in a very bad state. His body was covered with dirt. Flies were swarming around him. Because of paralysis, he could not even lift his hand to shoo away the flies. The boys searched for a bucket and filled it with water from a nearby well. They gave bath to Hubbalal and cleaned his clothes, cot and house. Someone from Agra had sent some beds and clothes for the handicapped. Shriram approached those people and fetched clothes for Hubbalal. They took care of him as long as he lived. When his condition deteriorated, one of the members of Shriram's group continuously stayed with him.

Hubbalal did not live for long. But as long as he lived, he kept learning from the service and love of the boys that nobody should ever harm others for selfish reasons. They should try their best to serve others. Before dying, Hubbalal was overcome with remorse. He called Shriram to his side and said, "If at all I have a next birth, I may be born as an animal. I would like to serve others even if God makes me a donkey."

Shriram said, "No Diwanji. Why do you say like that? You will be born as a human being. In that life, you will atone for all your mistakes and work for God." Hubbalal's eyes were filled with tears and his throat was choked with emotion. He haltingly said, "I have not done any good deeds so as to have the *punya* to bless you. If I have gained some *punya* by a stray deed, I pray to God that you get its reward. I ask God that he makes your fame immortal." After saying this, he lost his voice.

The call for Swaraj given by Lokamanya Tilak was reverberating from village to village. Wherever ten-fifteen enthusiastic people met, they discussed nothing other than this. The youth group was already active in Aanwalkheda. Both kinds of news - related to the national movement gaining momentum and increasing oppression of the British - reached the village. When they heard news about oppression, many people were frightened. All those families whose boys were part of the movement were worried.

Worried About the Young *Swarajis*

One day, all the parents met and discussed the matter amongst themselves. They reached the conclusion that their boys were not doing anything on their own. It was on listening to Shriram that they participated in procession and strike; pasted posters and did other revolutionary activities. It was decided that if they could control Shriram, the other boys will disperse on their own. On reaching this decision unanimously, four-five people approached Taiji. After exchanging the initial pleasantries, they came right to the point and said, "Taiji, the horses of the British troops are galloping everywhere and are capturing anyone working for the movement and putting them in the jail. We have got the news from other villages that nothing is known about the people after they are captured."

This frightening description was not meant to scare Taiji. People were expressing their fears honestly and said, "If you control your Shriram a little, then other children will also be safe. Otherwise who knows when the British soldiers may attack our village?"

Taiji got worried. She promised to keep an eye on Shriram's activities. The villagers went back with some consolation. After that, whenever Shriram went out of the house, Taiji would ask, "Where are you going?

When will you be back?" If he did not come back at the promised time, she would enquire why it happened and ask for clarification. She would further warn him that he should never get late in future. Shriram was not affected by Taiji's increased surveillance because whatever reply he gave her, she was satisfied with it. Even if he said that he had gone to attend a demonstration, even then Taiji did not scold him. Even if he said that he had gone to serve someone, Taiji did not say anything to him. It was as though a reply from him was enough for her.

Once, Shriram told his mother that he wanted to go to the Congress office in Agra. His mother refused. He kept on thinking as to whether he should disobey her? His inner-self suggested an answer that if his mother was preventing him because of her attachment, then he should not shy away from doing his duty towards the country. Hence it would be justified even if he disobeyed his mother in such a case. After having decided thus, he waited for an opportune time. One day, he woke up at two in the night. He took a mug of water and told the gatekeeper that he was going out. The gatekeeper thought that Shriram must have felt like going out of the house for relieving himself and opened the gate. After coming out, Shriram proceeded towards Agra. He walked the entire night. Instead of taking a direct route, he reached Agra hiding from people. He enquired and found out that *swayam sevaks* (volunteers) were being enrolled in the Congress office and they would be trained to work for the movement. The training camp was also to begin immediately. Shriram went and joined the training. Among the participants in the camp were revolutionaries like Jagan Prasad, Ganga Singh, Daddu, Uddham Singh etc. These people took part in the movement in a big way. Pandit Natthilal Sharma, Ram Narayan Shivhare and Vasudev Gupta were also in that camp.

In that camp, experienced revolutionaries taught the *swayam sevaks* on how to reach out to people; how to prepare pamphlets and posters; how to conduct meetings and how to create an atmosphere for political campaign. Shriram learnt all these during the seven-day training. Meanwhile he had sent a message to his mother that he was safe and that he would be back after the training. He had sent this message with the help of an organizer as soon as he enrolled into the training camp. In Aanwalkheda Taiji had had stopped taking food and water and was worrying about the well-being of her son. After she received his message, she felt relieved.

Work for Daily 'Sainik'

Sri Krishna Dutt Paliwal was one of the camp organizers. He was well known not only in Agra but all over Uttar Pradesh. He was much older than Shriram. The participants of the camp addressed him as '*Bhai Sahib*' (elder brother) or '*Netaji*' (leader). In addition to assuming leadership role in political movement, he was an expert in journalism and in writing revolutionary literature. When he saw Shriram, somehow he felt that Shriram was different and distinct among all the participating youth and volunteers. At that time Shriram was reading out a poem (he had written) among his friends at the camp. The poem was dripping with patriotism and the lyrics were something like this –

Koi bhi ho tera dushman, nischay hee mit jayega,
Trinsh koti humkaron se nabhmandal phat jayega

(Meaning: Whosoever is your enemy, he will certainly be ruined. The sky will be torn by the thirty crore shouts.)

Paliwalji heard this poem and patted Shriram's back and said, "Let this poem be printed in 'Sainik'. Whoever reads this poem is sure to hum it along." Shriram assured with enthusiasm that more of such poems could be composed. Paliwalji was then the editor and publisher of the newspaper called 'Sainik'. This daily, filled with patriotism and revolutionary feelings, was being published for the past three years. Paliwalji was also shouldering various other organizational responsibilities. He was in search of an associate and his search seemed to be over after meeting Shriram. He encouraged him to write and said that his poems would surely evoke patriotism in the minds of the people. Through this meeting, Shriram introduced Paliwalji to other revolutionary literature he had already written. It was those pamphlets and letters that he had written and distributed in several villages.

Paliwalji said that it would be nice if Shriram could come to Agra and help him with the newspaper work. Shriram agreed to join once relevant arrangements could be made. By 'relevant arrangements', all that he meant was the permission of his mother. The camp concluded and Shriram returned to Aanwalkheda. He gathered his youth group again. The restrictions imposed by their guardians no longer had any effect on the youth. The influence of Independence movement was spreading such that being aloof from it was looked down upon as backwardness or cowardice. Even if people didn't play active role in it, they did make such comments or observations. The short contact with Shriram filled his youth members with new enthusiasm. They began to attend the '*prabhat pheris*' (morning processions) ignoring their parents resentments. In those processions patriotic songs written by Shriram were sung. They would get so immersed in the songs that they had no cognizance of the outer world.

1929-1930 were the years of great upsurge in Indian Independence movement. During the Lahore Session in December 1929, Congress had announced that their aim was '*Poorna Swarajya*' (Complete Independence). The representatives from the assemblies were called back. They stopped all kinds of interactions with the government. On the midnight of 31st December, Jawahar Lal Nehru as the President of the session hoisted the National flag at Lahore. The flag was also tri-color even then but there was *charkha* (spinning wheel) at the center instead of the wheel. It was as though the country had declared itself independent by hoisting its own flag. There were celebrations and meetings in various places. 26th January was celebrated as Independence Day in the entire country. Shriram Sharma also hoisted the flag in his village. He had begun to write his complete name when he started publishing his poems and writings. When he hoisted the flag in the compound of his mansion, Pandit Gendaram was the first one to address him with his full name. He said, "Now, Pandit Shriram Sharma will speak a few words about the ceremony."

The Beginning of a New Avatar

The record of what Pandit Shriram Sharma spoke while addressing the youth is not available. But it definitely marked the beginning of an organized movement under the leadership of Shriram. After celebrating the first Independence Day on 26th January, 1930, Pandit Shriram Sharma distributed jaggery as Prasad. It was also announced that Independence Day would be celebrated every year. It was also decided that wherever the members of the group would gather and conduct a program, the flag would also be hoisted. 26th January became a new headline in the history of the entire country. Shriram Sharma of Aanwalkheda also donned his new avatar on that very day.

In April 1930, non-cooperation movement began. It was part of the political strategy to instill in the minds of people whatever was proposed at the Lahore session. On 6th April, Mahatma Gandhi started his Dandi march from Sabarmati Ashram. There were thousands of *satyagrahis* along with him. They reached a place called Dandi on the shores of the Arabian Ocean and prepared salt there. This movement was chosen as a symbolic revolt against the taxes levied on making salt and posed a challenge to the British government. The British also took it as a precursor to a bigger explosion. The wheel of suppression became severe. Many people were arrested.

There were some youth who could not be caught by the police during this suppression and arrests. Pandit Shriram Sharma was one of them. He had dug a pit at the outskirts of the village. He filled salt water in the pit and tried to make salt. He neither had the experience nor had taken any training in making salt. *Satyagrahis* had arranged for training camps in various places but not all the volunteers could take part in the training. Panditji tried to prepare salt symbolically. Before the process could be completed, a police party reached the village. They did lathi charge to disperse the crowd. Shriram and three other associates had got down into the pit of salt water and were trying to make salt.

The police ordered them to come out. The boys outside the pit had run away in fear. Those who were in the pit also began to slip away. But Shriram behaved as though he had not heard the command. The police shouted three-four times but Shriram ignored them every time. Looking at his indifference and defiance, two policemen got down into the pit and rained blows on him. He had injuries on his hands, shoulders, back and head. He fell into the water owing to the blows. The police left him lying in the water. Due to fear of police, nobody came to take care of Shriram. He was left lying in salt water the whole night. He was taken out in the morning. Taiji was under the impression that the police had arrested Shriram.

Mahapurashcharan and the *Sadhana* of Social Service

Shriram was continuing his *anushthan sadhana* along with participation in Independence struggle. Shriram used to complete this *sadhana* before sunrise in the morning and before sunset in the evening. After he had got used to do jap, five hours time was enough for it. In those days his involvement in national and social movements also increased. The dates are not exactly known, but Shriram was 19-20 years old then. Even in those days, there was the social practice of selling weak and feeble cows and let off cows that did not produce milk on the streets. Somebody in the village sold two cows to a butcher. Shriram got to know of this. He called an unplanned meeting of his '*Bal Sena*' and the plan of action was immediately decided. Shriram went along with a friend and spoke to the butchers. He implored them not to kill the cows. They said that if the money they had spent in buying the cows was reimbursed, they would give back the cows. Shriram hesitated for a while. The cost of those two cows was specified as eighteen rupees. It was possible to ask Taiji for this money but he did not want to do it. Shriram agreed to the bargain. He went to a money-lender named Guljari. He took a loan of rupees thirty five from him. Guljari was very well aware of Shriram's nature and honesty. Neither the interest for the amount was decided nor was anything held as mortgage. He gave the loan without any security. Shriram got back the cows from the butcher and with the rest of the money rented a bullock-cart. He made them sit in the ox-cart. After going for some distance, one of the bullocks came to a standstill. He learnt that it was sick. He unyoked the bullock and placed his shoulders in its place. In this way he inched the cows forward. He continued like this for three days and reached a *Goshala* (cowshed) where he left the cows. On the fourth day, he returned home. He took the help of his *Bal Sena* to pay back the money-lender. Everybody contributed a small sum and the money was returned to Guljari.

Unimaginable Courage

This is also an incident of those days. There was fire in the house of one of the grocers, Sulekhchand, in the village. The home and shop were in the same building. The house was made of brick and cement but the roof was made of bamboo that was covered by the baked tiles of mud. The roof caught fire. Sulekhchand was more worried about his wares than about rescuing his children from fire. The children were smart and somehow jumped out of the house. They shouted and attracted the attention of others and said that their sister-in-law was still inside. She was the daughter-in-law of the grocer and was pregnant at that time. Shriram reached the spot and took stock of the situation. He looked at all sides to assess the available options. He went to a nearby house and procured a ladder. The flames were so intense at the entrance of the house that nobody could enter. He used the ladder and entered the house through the roof. In a few minutes, he came out with the lady propped on his shoulders. First-aid was provided to her. The family of the merchant kept thanking him profusely, but Shriram moved on.

There was another incident that occurred a few days after Shriram saved the lady from the fire. A widow had become pregnant through a youth belonging to a different caste. Since she had become a widow just a few days after her wedding, her in-laws had sent her back to the parents. Hence she was staying with her mother and father. The very fact that a widow was in the house itself was sufficient to feel cursed during those days. On top of it, she became pregnant. It became extremely tough for the parents to live in that village. Everybody began to wag their tongues.

Shriram intervened in this situation and advised the parents to remarry their daughter. Initially people made fun of this suggestion. The family of the girl also pleaded that they did not want to land into one more trouble. Shriram explained that there was no sin in doing so and that this practice was prevalent in the past and that the scriptures had a provision for this. After pausing for a while, he said that even the government says that if a widow wants to remarry, she could do so. Shriram managed to convince them in the name of scriptures, traditions, government and great people. They finally agreed but the only question that remained was about what was to be done with the child in the womb. Shriram said, "Let the child take birth. God will take care of him too."

After the girl's parents agreed, Shriram took her father to Mathura. He met the chief priest Vedavrat of Chauk branch of Arya Samaj. He explained the entire situation. After searching for three-four months, an appropriate groom was found. He was a widower named Jeevan Prasad Sharma and had a child from his demised wife. The details about the girl were given to him and he agreed. The child born to that girl is now leading the last phases of his life in an industrial town in Uttar Pradesh. His family is also prospering.

Katha in the House of Girvar

Shriram had just crossed his teens and entered his youth. There is one incident of that time worth mentioning. There was a sweeper named

Girvar who used to maintain cleanliness outside their ancestral mansion. He also took care of the horse of Shriram's uncle. Girvar felt a desire to conduct *Satyanarayan Katha* in his house. But no priest was ready to do this. He enquired from four-five people and even promised good fee and donation, but no one was ready to go to the house of a low caste person to conduct *Katha*. Because of this, Girvar was disappointed and upset. One day, when he was speaking to Shriram, he inadvertently said, "I want to do a *Katha* at home but my fate is bad." Shriram immediately asked in a tone which was a blend of affection and resentment, "Why? What happened? What is wrong with your fate?" His resentment was toward the sullen face of Girvar. He replied, "We are untouchables. Hence nobody is willing to conduct the *Katha* in our house." Shriram waited for a few moments and said, "Be ready by taking bath tomorrow morning. Let all the family members take bath and be clean. I will come to conduct *Katha* in your house." Girvar's face shone bright on hearing Shriram's assurance, but in the next instant he became sad and said, "When other priests are not coming, why will anyone allow you to come. Taiji and others will prevent you from coming."

Shriram asked him not to worry about this. Girvar was overwhelmed by a sense of doubt as well as confidence and returned home. He gave the news to his family and began to make preparations. They cleaned the house, washed all the clothes including beds; the utensils were washed. They plastered the floor too. They worked late into the night and the house shone bright with cleanliness. The teenager priest came the next morning along with his *Katha* book, *havan kund*, conch and other things required for the *puja*. Girvar had also invited people of his caste. Twenty five – thirty people had gathered in his house.

Katha began in the traditional fashion. After each chapter, the conch was blown along with shouts of victory (*jayakaar*). After the *Katha* was completed, the *aarti* was conducted by ringing the bells. The people gathered there were brimming with joy and enthusiasm. They sang the *aarti* '*Om jai jagadish hare* —' with full enthusiasm. The sound of conches and shouts of triumph reached the other houses in the village. They could not comprehend anything immediately. When they did understand, the Brahmans and other higher caste people became furious.

A group of fifteen – twenty people spitting insults proceeded towards the Harijan quarters. One could hear their march from a distance. Girvar said, "Babu Sahib, people are coming to beat us up. Please escape from here. "Shriram refused to run away from there and leave the Harijans to become the target of the group's fury. Girvar and his family pleaded and pressurized Shriram to leave. Shriram laid a condition that Girvar should not accept the blame at any cost. Before the group even had a chance to speak, Girvar was supposed to say that Shriram had insisted on conducting the *Katha* and that he himself was not prepared for this at all. Only after Girvar accepted this condition and gave his word that Shriram agreed to leave.

Before the group of Brahmins reached Girvar's house, Shriram had collected his belongings and left the place. He hid himself from other people and reached home. At Girvar's house, his family repeated the same words that Shriram had asked them to say. Everybody was aware of Shriram's stubborn nature. Hence, they accepted that it was possible that Shriram insisted on the *Katha*. They came back and complained to Taiji about it. Taiji scolded Shriram a little and the matter was closed with just that.

Office of the Revolutionaries

To introduce new *sanskars* in the society, Shriram began to express his thoughts both through writing and through speeches. In those days, it was not easy to write anything about Independence movement or against the British. Shriram mainly wrote poems and sent them to be published in 'Sainik' in Agra, 'Pratap' in Kanpur and 'Viswamitra' in Kolkata. Magazines like 'Shirkat' and 'Mastana' also published his poems.

As part of independence movement, they not only had to conduct meetings but also had to discuss and solve social issues and problems. Meetings had to be conducted somewhere or the other. Shriram told his associates that they should finalize the venue for their meetings and it should not be someone's residence because other family members and elders would be disturbed by their proceedings.

Taiji offered them a solution. She mentioned a part of their mansion where they could conduct the meetings. The group members told her that they had decided to maintain the office away from anybody's residence. Taiji insisted that nobody would disturb their activities and they could operate twenty four hours a day if they so wished. The members of *Bal Sena* refused. Taiji then expressed her inner fears. She said that meetings in the Shiva temple might pose a threat to Shriram and that she was afraid that she would lose him to Lord Shiva. Everyone respected her fears and feelings about Shriram and accepted a part of the mansion as their office. They also took a promise from her that nobody would be informed about their activities there. Taiji herself showed them the room, which was spacious enough to easily seat twenty – twenty five people. They were also assured that they could get food and water when needed. Thus, in a small room of Aanwalkheda, a revolutionary office was inaugurated.

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Call from the Himalayas

It was the first lunar month of *Chaitra* of *Samvat* 1985 (AD 1928). On the occasion of *Chaitra Navratri*, *Shakti puja* and *Ram Charit Manas parayan* had started in the entire village. Shriram's *sadhana* was being performed as usual. He had not done anything special for the *chaitra navaratri*. Whatever process of *sadhana* he was following was in itself wonderful and uplifting in nature. He had decided to completely abstain from taking solid food on all the nine days. He was taking only water and milk. Probably it was *panchami* (fifth day of lunar month). Shriram got up as usual at around 3 A. M. and got ready to start his regular *anushthan*. At the time of waking up and taking bath, his mind was bubbling with joy. In reality, from the previous evening several ideas were crossing his mind. He felt as though something new had to be started. What is it that had to be started was not clear. He certainly felt as though he had to start out on the next phase of the life's journey.

He completed the requisite *jap* for *Mahapurashcharan*. After he had offered his *jap* to the Lord and sat down after circumambulation, a voice arose from within. He felt as though the voice emanated from the same divine guide who had directed him to travel to Himalayas two years before on the day of *Vasant Panchami*. The room was filled with the same divine fragrance and his consciousness was filled with the same joy as he had experienced during the previous *Vasant Panchami*. The guide did not visibly manifest in front of him. The voice was also not such that others could hear. The voice reverberated in his inner being. It was indicated during the previous visit, that he would call Shriram to Himalayas at appropriate time for giving him direct guidance. That time had come. The voice asked him to immediately travel towards the Himalayas and that they would meet there.

On the fifth day of *Navaratri*, he was being reminded of the same instruction given on the previous *Vasant Panchami* - "Now, the roads of Uttarkhand are covered with snow. The gates of Badri and Kedar are also closed and will be opened within a month. That much time will definitely be required to prepare for the travel and to reach the indicated point." The instructions were coming from within him. He felt as though someone was sitting inside him and speaking. Once the inspiration from within was concretely felt, there was no scope for second thought. He instantly resolved to get ready for the pilgrimage. After completing his *sandhya*, he told his mother that he had received an order from Gurudev.

The Instruction that Came from Within

"What order has come?" asked Taiji. "I have to spend sometime in his proximity"- Shriram replied. Taiji had no doubts about her son anymore - whether he would leave her and go to the Himalayas and not return or whether he would become a *sadhu-sanyasi*. She just asked, "For how long have you to be away?"

"I don't know about it. But it looks like Gurudev will keep me with him for three – four days. Count 10 days for traveling to and fro", said Shriram.

On hearing this, Taiji's face reflected approval and she said, "Ok then, it will take around two weeks. Go prepared for this duration. The climate has changed here. But at the places you would be traveling to, it would be freezing cold in all seasons. Take enough woolen clothes to protect you from the cold."

She continued speaking without a break, "Well, what will you do? Let me pack all the things myself. Also, why don't you talk to Pandit Dharmadeenji because he frequently goes to Haridwar-Rishikesh. He has even gone as far as Gangotri. He can advise you correctly regarding the routes, etc."

Shriram did not discuss much about his Himalayan Guru or about his detailed instructions. He had mentioned to her at a couple of occasions that he lived in the Himalayas and that he could come and go anywhere. He could also disappear and appear anywhere. When he said that he had an invitation from Gurudev, it did not take long for Taiji to understand that Shriram was talking about the same Gurudev. She had unflinching faith in him that he would not separate her from Shriram or make him a mendicant. There was no clear reason for her to have faith in his Gurudev and Shriram did not want to understand it too. When she had given her permission to travel, Pandit Dharmadeen who was like an uncle to Shriram said, "Bhabhiji, how come you are letting him travel alone? The *sadhus* and *sanyasis* there will feed him a pill of renunciation."

Taiji merely laughed at his comment. She just asked him to give advice that might help Shriram to travel easily. She confidently told him that Shriram would return the same way that he was going there. There were several others who advised against sending Shriram alone or even going to the Himalayas. But she turned a deaf ear to all of them.

She felt that even in the month of *Vaishakh*, the weather near Badri-Kedar would be biting cold. She had never been to those regions but had heard from *sadhus* and others who went to Badri-Kedar on pilgrimage. Hence she continued to feed Shriram the diet suited for cold season. Typically she used to stop this diet by *Chaitra Navaratri*. The food items were not any special. Taiji gave him things like honey, ginger, sesame seeds and others which generate heat.

For her, travel to Himalayas meant only upto Badrinath and Kedarnath or farthest upto Gangotri and Yamunotri. Even this was rare. When Shriram said that he had to go to Himalayas, she assumed that it was upto Kedarnath. Neither did she ask further nor did Shriram say anything more. He himself did not know how far he had to go or where he had to go as per the call of his Guru.

Taiji enquired with people and got several things ready for the journey, which included cotton clothes, woolen clothes, shoes with rubber-soles, blanket, stick, candle, torch etc. She packed all the things into two bags made of cloth. Somebody advised that it would be better to pack them in a trunk. It would then not get wet in rain. But Taiji replied, "The trunk would be too heavy for my son to carry around.

When it comes to the problem of rain, wherever he takes shelter during rain, the bags can also be taken there." Before Shriram's travel, Taiji remembered that he should also carry an umbrella. She searched the whole house and got one for him. Now, Shriram was ready for his journey to the Himalayas.

Travel Light

Taiji had packed all the things with love and care. The luggage was not more than 20 kilograms. On reaching Rishikesh, he felt that it was a little too much. Shriram reached Rishikesh on 23rd April. He was seated on the banks of the Ganga and meditating. It was a pleasant evening. By the end of April, the climate of Rishikesh becomes pleasant. The cold would have receded and summer would not have set in. The pilgrims begin to flock the place. But now, travelers are present in all seasons. All kinds of resources needed to protect oneself from cold or heat are available in Rishikesh. But this was not the case during 1927-28. In those days, being able to carry woolen clothes was looked upon as a symbol of sound financial position. Even middle class and upper middle class people used to protect themselves from cold by basking in the sun or lighting a small fire. When both these two options were not available, they would wear several layers of clothing, one on the other.

While seated on the banks of the Ganga, Shriram's eyes fell on some *sanyasis*. They were coming out of the river after bath. They sat on the stairs of the *ghat* and removed ashes from their bag and rubbed it on their bodies. Shriram had seen many *sanyasis* with ashes on their bodies, but it never occurred to him that it was a means of protecting oneself from cold. He saw the group of *sanyasis* leave after finishing their evening routine. Shriram got up from his seat and approached a senior *sanyasi* who raised his hands in blessing. Shriram asked, "Maharaj, where are you traveling to?"

Sanyasi replied, "We are going to Badrinath. If you want to come along, you can join. Looks like you are alone. The travel will be easier in a group. We can talk about some spiritual topics during the journey."

Shriram felt that this person was a little talkative. His intention was not to accompany their group but to find out some details about preparing for the travel. Shriram replied, "No, No, I do not want to go to Badrinath."

"Where do you have to go then? Have you run away from home? Do you want to become an ascetic? What are you doing here? To which place do you belong?" The *sadhu* who looked like a *Mandaleswar* (head of a sect) asked several questions in one breath. Shriram was left astonished with the burst of questions. He began to repent as to for having spoken to him in the first place. He said, "Forgive me sir, I have made a mistake and wasted your time."

"Child, don't worry. I know what you want to ask" said the *sanyasi*. Shriram did not reply and continued to look at him. The *sanyasi* continued, "Have faith on the person in reply to whose call you have come upto here. He will take you wherever he wants. It is better to travel alone than in someone's company."

Towards Badrinath

What did *sanyasi* mean by his words? Shriram did not understand anything and he did not try to decipher it also. The message that the conversation gave him was not to worry about cold or the travel. The Himalayan guru who has invited him will also take care of him during the journey. Thinking in this manner, Shriram left some of his things at Rishikesh. They included an umbrella, some clothes and a blanket. When he put a blanket in the bag, he remembered that his Guru was naked when he appeared to him the first time. He felt that it might be possible to protect oneself from cold without clothes, and then what was the point in carrying so much luggage and clothes?

The group of *sanyasis* was going to Badrinath. Shriram maintained some distance from them and began walking in the same direction. He had not decided to go to Badrinath. In fact, he had not decided about any place. He just followed his inner inspiration and walked. One had to reach Badrinath via Devaprayag, Rudraprayag, Karnaprayag, Nandaprayag and Vishnuprayag. Even in those days, there were ordinary means of transport and walkways. But the *sanyasis* chose a different route. If one was to travel on the familiar route, Badrinath was about 300 kms from Rishikesh.The route that the ascetics chose was less then 60 kms long. Traveling through some unknown mountain terrains, they reached Joshi *Matha* by the next evening itself.

He took rest in front of Nrusimha temple. After completing his morning *puja*, Shriram went inside the temple. The idol made of Shaligram stone was wonderful. One arm of the idol was very thin. On seeing it for the first time, one would feel as though it would break by mere touch. But this fear was baseless. The idol had been like that for centuries. But it is the belief of people that the day this arm gets separated, then the mountains, Nar and Narayan, will meet. Both the mountains are a little away from *Joshi matha*. There is a road in between them that goes all the way to Badrinath. People believe that once both the mountains come together, it will become impossible for anyone to go to Badrinath. In such a case, the *puja* of 'Badri Vishal' will take place in Bhavishya Badri. It is also the belief that such an incident will mark the end of *Kali Yug* or the creation will be dissolved in waters of *pralay*.

Shriram heard such discussions in the surroundings of the temple itself, but did not pay too much attention to them. He went to Joshi *matha* soon after having the *darshan* of Lord Nrusimha. The *matha* was established by Adi Shankaracharya. He had appointed Trotakacharya as his representative. The tradition of *Puja-Aarati* of Badrinath during winter was started by Shankaracharya. Evidences also say that Badrinath temple was destroyed by foreign invaders who came through the passes of the Himalayas. The idol there was also broken and thrown into the river. It was Adi Shankaracharya who re-installed Badrinath. The same great Acharya established Joshi *matha*. Everybody knows that four such *mathas* were established in four corners of the country by him.

The Controversy of Shankar *Matha*

In Joshi *matha*, there were idols of Shankaracharya and Trotak, his disciple and the first Acharya of this *matha*. When Shriram visited, there was no head priest for Shankar *matha*. A junior priest, named Rawal from South India, was taking care of the daily worship. The monastery had been without a head priest for about 150 years. Shriram's heart was saddened to see the sad state of affairs in a monastery started by Shankaracharya, who was considered an incarnation of Shiva himself. He heard the entire story from the priests there. Standing up, he walked up to the crystal Shivaling and did *Abhishek* there. It is said that this idol came from Kailash and Adi Shankaracharya himself had installed it. Remembering this, Shriram went into deep thought. After walking a few steps he appeared vexed. The inner turmoil might have saddened him. The rise of emotions was due to seeing destruction of the culture and damage to the honor and prestige of the ancient civilization.

Shriram came out of the temple and sat in the shade of a tree nearby. He started thinking on what direction to travel next. He was also thinking about the legend of coming together of the Nara and Narayana mountains and the impending catastrophes on earth. Staying in these thoughts for 10-15 minutes, he didn't realize when he dozed off. He had slept off sitting under the tree. The journey on mountainous terrain had tired him off. He had slept well at night, but probably he was still tired. He woke up after half an hour. There was a small stream – Dand Dharaa in front of Joshi *matha*. Shriram washed his face in this stream and sipped its water.

After taking water, a thought flashed by – where to go next? With the question, the answer also came – 'Go towards Mansarovar through Bhavishya Badri'. The answer had come as an inspired thought from inside. It can also be considered as a command sent by his Guru. Once the destination and route were decided, Shriram started off towards Neetighat. He reached Tapovan after traveling about ten kilometers on the mountainous route. After freshening up in the hot stream there, he reached *Bhavishya Badri*. It was completely tranquil there. A few people could be seen here and there. The Vishnu temple there had not opened yet. The priest stayed nearby, but since there were not many visitors, he was lax on following the schedule. In the temples, who cares for *Puja –Aradhana* (worship)? The basis of importance of the shrines is the size of the crowd of visitors. Shriram realized this in

Mathura, Vrindavan and Rishikesh. He was not surprised to see the temple closed here.

In Bhavishya Badri

There was a *Peepal* (fig tree) there. A stone was seen under the tree. Shriram looked at this stone closely. He could see signs of worship on this stone. Dry leaves and dust had accumulated on it as if no one had cleaned it for a few days. Shriram felt that this was no ordinary stone. Since there were flowers and other articles of worship, it was obvious that it was some idol. When he cleaned the stone, he could see that it was indeed an idol, but half- carved. Only the upper half of the deity was carved on the stone; even that was not clear. After a lot of effort, it appeared that it might be an idol of Vishnu.

He was confused. The Vishnu temple was nearby. Then why was this idol lying outside? He couldn't find an answer. He wanted to know how the *Bhavishya Badri* (Badrinath of the future) was; so he waited for a priest to come by and sat in the shade of a tree nearby. Later in the afternoon, he saw the priest come up. The priest came and first collected all the offerings left at the door of the temple and then opened the door. He was mumbling something. He was probably angry at the meager offerings available that day.

Shriram got up to have *darshan* when the doors opened. Traditionally it is prohibited to go inside the sanctum sanctorum of the temple of Lord Vishnu. So Shriram stood outside and folded his hands in prayer. Pujari said, "Do you want to come inside? You can have a close look at the idol from here; but you will have to pay rupee one and a quarter."

Shriram froze on the spot. Even in this jungle, a person was trying to earn his living from people coming to worship the Lord. Shriram stayed outside the sanctum sanctorum and bowed from there. The priest again said – "Think again; you can avail the opportunity as there is no one here; otherwise no one is allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum." Shriram rejected the offer and said – "No *Maharaj* (a form of address for the priest)! I do not want to violate the rules. I will stay here"

The priest mumbled something. Shriram could not hear it, but he understood the intentions. He said "Don't worry *Maharaj*! I will give you the desired *Dakshina*". He took out rupee one and a quarter from his bag and kept it on the door-frame of the sanctum sanctorum.

This changed the behavior of the priest immediately. He said – "You appear to be from a noble family. Have you come alone? Why did you think of a pilgrimage at such a young age? Do you want to become a Sanyasi? Don't accept anyone looking like an ascetic as your Guru. Most of them are cheats."

In the joy of having received money, the priest asked all the questions in one breath and also gave his advice. Shriram recognized the reason for the sudden change of attitude. Yet he appreciated it and asked – "Whose idol is it that is lying outside?"

The priest replied –"The idol is not completely carved. No one is carving it. It is being carved with time by Nature. When the idol is completed, then Badrinath will be worshipped here. Then the mountains Nara and Narayan would meet. Now a fair is held here once in 24 years in honor of Laata Devi. Then, when Badri Vishal appears here, there will be a fair every year."

Continuing, he suddenly became serious and said "Then I too would not have to commit the sin of inviting people inside the sanctum sanctorum. I would earn well enough by the offerings of people who come to visit Badrinath." Shriram listened indulgently to the priest's monologue. What had started off as anger initially when the priest asked for money had turned into pity now. He was a poor man and his poverty had driven him to this wretched state. The priest continued –"Who knows when the two mountains will meet. I will not be alive then. Hopefully, some of the later generations would benefit from it."

The priest was busy with thoughts of money. Shriram left him to his reverie and came out of the temple. The unknown destination of his journey was pulling him and the route was through Neetighat. He did not know where this place was or even its name. Yet the pull was irresistible. The route he was taking was through arduous steep mountain paths. The path was full of gravel and thorns. Walking on it for a few miles would tire a person. After his bath in Dand Dhaara at Joshi *Matha*, Shriram's tiredness didn't attack him again. Carrying his belongings in two bags, one on each shoulder, a sturdy stick in his hand and a pair of thick soled rubber shoes on his feet, Shriram moved forward at an even pace.

At Hemkund Sahib

After traveling for about twenty kilometers, Shriram stopped by a lake. The lake was fully encircled by mountains. Their reflections could be clearly seen in the tranquil waters of the lake. Stone platforms had been erected on the banks of the lake and it appeared that once upon a time, people used to sit on them. They might have been coming there either to enjoy the natural beauty or to practice meditation. Sitting on one such platform, Shriram looked into the waters. It appeared as if the snow had just melted and clear water was nestling in between the mountains. The crystal-clear water reflected the sky and mountains as if it was a mirror. Apart from the reflections and the depth of the lake, nothing else was visible in the water.

Shriram looked around. He could see that seven mountains were around the lake and there were twenty four platforms around the lake. He started to wonder if the place was a seat of penance sometime in the past! A thought entered his mind – Himalayas is the home to many sages. Why should this place have been used in the past only? Sages could probably be using this place even now.

He later learnt about the lake. It is believed that the founder of Khalsa Panth, Guru Govind Singh, had performed penance at that place in his previous birth. His name then was Muni Medhas. After this fact was known, the place became a *Teerth* (holy place) for Sikhs from 1936 onwards. This place is now known as Hemkund Sahib. Now, there is a Gurudwara and there are good facilities for lodging. Shriram sat at that place for a long time. It appeared as if he was waiting for someone. Sitting on the banks of the lake, it appeared to him as if someone was trying to speak to him. The sound was not clear. He looked around and could not find anyone, yet there was a voice.

After calming his mind, the voice became clearer. The voice was very feeble; it appeared that it was coming out of a throat which was not used for hundreds of years; a throat that had forgotten how to speak. He guessed the source of the sound and saw a dark figure sitting on a platform five platforms away. It appeared as if that figure was calling Shriram. He went to that person and paid his respects. A voice came from the figure – "You can call me by any name. I don't have a name.

I have been asked to tell you that you should reach near Gomukh. There is Nandanvan beyond Gomukh. You are being awaited there."

The directions of *Gurusatta*

Shriram accepted as truth whatever was said by the figure. He could only say that he didn't know the route. The figure said – "The route is not difficult. Go back to Joshi *matha*. Do not take the route through Chamoli, Gopeshwar, Guptakashi etc. That would be a very long route. You will meet some people in Joshi *Matha*. Join them and you will reach Gomukh by a shorter route by tomorrow evening." Shriram accepted this as the direction from his *Gurusatta* and nodded his head in acceptance. The figure continued to speak – "There is no need to stop anywhere or take rest. You can rest only at Gomukh. Did you understand?"

Shriram replied "Yes Sir." That figure then entered the lake ankle-deep and started offering *arghya*. He didn't turn back after giving the message. One has to be unattached in this manner on the path of *sadhana*. Shriram also took bath in the water, gathered his belongings and left the place. He did not have to do anything to remember the meeting with this strange person. It just vanished from his memory as a line drawn on water. After sitting on the banks of the lake for some more time, Shriram started back towards Joshi *Matha*.

Towards Tapovan

The time it took to return to Joshi *Matha* was felt a little longer than the onward journey. It could be due to fact that it was a return journey. The route had been seen before and hence there was no curiosity or adventure involved. After that, it was as though time was just flying.

In Joshi *Matha*, he met two old *sanyasis* near Shankar Cave. The difference between their ages would have been about ten – fifteen years. Elder *sanyasi* was about sixty-year old and his name was Swami Nirmalanand and the younger one was named Swami Gambhiranand. They were Guru and disciple. Shriram introduced himself and interacted with them with natural ease. It did not take any time for them to decide that they would travel together. Within ten minutes it was decided that they would move together upto Gomukh. It all happened as though everything was decided in advance.

The season in which this travel was being undertaken was winter. The difficulties during the travel were more fearsome than the climate. The words of the *Tapasvi* who gave the message to go to Gomukh near the lake beyond *Bhavishya Badri* were echoing in the mind of Shriram. After meeting that *Tapasvi*, a ray of hope awoke in Shriram that he might meet some *Siddha Purush* or *Yogi* on the way. In the mountainous terrain in which he was traveling with *sanyasis*, there were caves everywhere. He felt as though some *siddha-mahatma* will emerge out from such a cave. When they moved past a cave without any such incident, Shriram would feel disappointed. They would then move till the next cave with the same hope and then face the same disappointment again.

There reached a state when he lost all hope about meeting a *siddha yogi*. The distance was covered easily by conversing with his two fellow-travelers. There were small shops at halting places. All three of them would stop and take some rest there. They also spent time talking to the residents of the hilly terrain who visited those shops. The shops sold useful things like wheat flour, pulses, rice, gram, jaggery, *sattu*, potatoes, matchboxes, etc. There was a facility to cook and eat also at the shops. On buying the provisions, they gave cooking utensils and other things free of cost.

Shriram did not encounter too many camping or halting places. They passed through some villages which were very sparsely populated. In that little population, the percentage of women was more. Men had gone out to earn a livelihood. Even if there was company, one was sure to feel frightened of the lonely roads where every once in a while wild animals were seen. During the twenty - twenty two hours of their journey, they came face to face with tigers, leopards and bears more than fifteen times. At some places, smaller tigers were also seen. Today, such tigers are not at all seen in these regions. People who trade the skin of wild animals have almost decimated the population of those animals. But, during 1927-28 such tigers were present in large numbers.

The route to Gomukh which normally took three days was covered in one day itself. Gomukh is twenty kms from Gangotri, but one had to climb up hazardous and narrow paths to reach there. The two *sanyasis* went their way after reaching Gomukh. They had been living in these regions for the past twenty years and hence were conversant with the short-cut routes to the places. They were familiar with every nook and corner of Uttarkhand. The short-cuts were extremely difficult, but those who traveled by foot normally chose those routes only. Those who have a robust body prefer to reach their destination faster by going through the short-cuts.

Danger on all sides

Beyond Gomukh, there were just valleys of snow and nothing else. On all sides, it was as though a white blanket had been spread. On this snowy plateau, there were challenges at each step. There were so many ravines and trenches that the danger of falling into them was ever-present. The route beyond Gomukh was just four kilometers, but one had to be extremely cautious and careful at each step. There were places in which instead of snow, stones and sand were seen.

While walking these four kms, Shriram remembered his journey during the previous two days several times. Those routes were no less dangerous; however they did not have these fatal ravines at each step. Main threat was then from the wild animals: when face to face to them, it was as though one was confronting death. But those animals also feared men. Wherever they had to camp for the night, they could hear the hissing of black cobras and pythons. They had come across huge lizards, bears, leopards and elephants. On the snowy plateau of Tapovan, Shriram remembered those encounters but this plateau was even more threatening and nerve-wracking. One could only see a *sanyasi* or two here and there. They told some stories about their travel. If one was to concentrate on those experiences, then it was all the more hair-raising and fearsome.

Shriram came out of his adventurous musings and experiences and began to enjoy the colorful rocks and flowers on the way. On a landscape that was carpeted with snow, these rocks and flowers were beautifying it with rainbow hues. At the same time, Shriram remembered the dangerous ravines present there. The two contradicting experiences made him understand that true happiness in life is experienced only when one always remembers death. Only when we bear in mind the fatality of death can we completely live the present life. The moments available to us are spent in achieving our goal and this is what gives us the blend of truth and happiness. Along with this experience, he also remembered that he did not have to wear any woolen clothes in the past three – four days.

He was not tormented by cold at all. As he was thinking about cold, there arose a thought in his mind that when face, eyes, ears, nose etc do not feel the cold though they are not covered, then why should other parts of the body feel the cold? People on the mountains live without woolen clothes. They do not feel cold. He remembered the words of Swami Nirmalananda when they had traveled together from Joshi *Matha* to Gomukh. He had said, "The Mountains are cold on the outside. But there are caves which are very warm. Leaves like *langda, marcha* and others produce heat when eaten raw. If one was to boil the knots present on the *Bhojpatra*, and drink the potion made of them, there is no chance of feeling the cold at all. Even when one sits with knees and head pressed onto the stomach, one does not feel cold." The journey that was full of dangerous situations, wild animals and natural dangers presented itself in a different way in the present situation and was making it all the more thrilling.

On that plateau, he met a *sanyasi* named Swami Tatvabodhanand. He had made a small hut for himself but he rarely stayed there. Most of his time was spent in the snow-clad Tapovan. He had draped his body in a single cloth. His hut was for people who reached upto that point once in a while. When someone went there and was shivering due to the cold, he asked them to stay in the hut. Except for this, the hut remained unused. From the point where Tapovan begins, there was no ashram, house, temple or *teerth*.

Entering Nandanvan

Moving beyond Tapovan, one enters Nandanvan. Rarely could a traveler reach there in those days. Except snow and a herb or two somewhere, nothing else was visible within the reach of eyesight. There was no tourist spot or pilgrim center there. That is why people sensibly went only upto Tapovan and not beyond it. Ninety nine percent of the people ended their pilgrimage at Gomukh itself. That is why Nandanvan remained ever isolated and devoid of attraction. Had Shriram not got the command to go there, he too would never have turned his face towards this place. Nandanvan is a few kilometers beyond the plateau. The conditions there were much more frightening. A thin film of snow was present everywhere so that one had to watch each step while walking on it. Swami Tatvabodhananda had told, "When you extend a foot forward, you should place it on the snow very slowly as though you are placing it on a flower. This applies even when you have taken the foot away from the ground to move forward. One can also use a stick but it is advisable not to trust the stick alone; care and caution would be required even then. Until the body is balanced when you move one foot, do not lift your other foot. There are water pits from place to place. This technique can be used to avoid them too."

One flower valley is also located in Bhuyinder valley, near Dhandhariya beyond Joshi Matha. This is called Nandan Kanan. The more famous name for it is 'Valley of flowers'. This is the place where Lakshman had done penance in *Treta Yug*. People believe that the Valley of flowers was created by Parashuram. During the Swayamvar of Sita, he had been asked by Lord Rama to retire to the Himalayas and do atonement for straying away from the *dharma* of Brahmin by killing the

Kshatriyas. He had taken weapons in his hands to curb the immoral Kshatriyas but he felt the he had swerved from the Dharma of a Brahmin. He sought Lord's advice to alleviate this pain of sin. The Lord had then asked him to beautify the Himalayan region with flowers and plants. A partial avatar of Vishnu, Parashuram, had done penance in this region and planted innumerable varieties of flowering plants. In the region that stretches five kilometers in length and two kilometers in width, one can find more than 700 varieties of flowering plants. No other part of the world has so many flowering plants and herbs.

The Nandanvan that Shriram reached was different from this place which is famous by the name of 'Valley of flowers" This place was not accessible to anyone. Let alone easy entry, this place could not be reached even if one was ready to take lot of trouble and exhibit immense courage. Shriram followed the instructions given by Swami Tatvabodhananda. Even then he faced great difficulties at some places. Even when the foot was firmly lodged, he felt as though it was sinking into the depths of the ground. The very next moment he experienced as though someone was holding his hands and helping him get stabilized.

They Again Meet Face to Face

After walking for two to two-and-a-half kilometers with care and caution, he saw a hillock. Some herbs were seen making their way out of the snow-clad hillock. He was surprised on seeing this greenery amidst stony hard snow. Then he answered it himself that this must be the miracle of nature or it was possible that this is natural phenomenon. When one does not know the working process of a natural phenomenon, then it is natural for one to assume it to be a miracle. The moment his attention was on the herbs, there was a cool breeze which had a slight fragrance. He tried to identify the smell and realized that it was the same fragrance that he had experienced in his *puja* room on the day of *Vasant Panchami* in 1926. The moment he recognized the fragrance, he turned his eyes away from the herbs and looked in the direction from which the fragrance was coming. Gurudev was standing in his *Digambar* (naked) form a few steps away from him. Shriram was overwhelmed with joy on seeing him. He bent down to offer his respects. The hands of the Digambar Yogi were raised in the blessing mode. Behind the snow-white beard and moustache, one could see a smile emerge from his lips. The shine of his eyes was greeting Shriram. He did not say anything. He did not follow the ritual of asking for his well-being. He merely signaled Shriram to follow him.

Shriram began to follow his Gurudev. Now he was no more worried about walking cautiously. He was walking behind his guide with a peaceful mind free from any kind of anxiety. Gurudev was proceeding towards the same hillock seeing which Shriram was filled with awe. But he did not climb the hillock. He went into a cave dug in the snow. While going into the cave behind Gurudev, a thought crossed Shriram's mind as to what would happen if the snow present above fell and closed the cave. They would then be buried alive. Immediately, he laughed at his own thought. The moment he laughed, Gurudev said – "Being buried alive has its own benefit. You can then take up a subtle body and begin to live in this home of enlightened ones!"

On entering the cave, Shriram saw that there were some stones. Gurudev pointed to a stone and asked him to take his seat. Shriram sat on that stone. He kept his bags and other belongings on the floor and began to look affectionately at Gurudev. Gurudev was looking at something in the vessel kept near the *Dhuni* (fire-place). He lifted the vessel and went upto the back-door. There was no adequate light in the cave and hence everything was looking blurred. Shriram only saw that Gurudev stood at the door for a while and then came back to him. He gave the vessel to Shriram and asked him to drink from it. Shriram did not even have a desire to ask him about the contents of the vessel. When he drank it, it was warm and the taste was salty-sweet. Seeing Shriram drink, Gurudev said, "It is the potion of Sanjeevini. After drinking this, your hunger and thirst will be quenched. The body will get adequate nourishment." Truly,k after drinking the potion, Shriram felt a sense of contentment and began to feel sleepy. Gurudev was seated at the *Dhuni*. After putting some fire-wood it was burning brightly and the atmosphere became warm. Before sleeping, Shriram prostrated before his Gurudev and then folded his right arm and using it as a pillow, he went into sound sleep.

When he woke up, there was nobody in the cave, not even Gurudev. There was also no message or instruction from him. The moment he came out of sleep, Shriram stretched his body and sat up. There was no lethargy that is typically present when one wakes up. He looked around the cave. Near the stone, there was a basket with two fruits. The basket was made out of the tough skin of a forest fruit. That fruit must be bigger than the size of a coconut. He felt like eating those fruits, but his mind and intellect put a check on his desire. He did not know how much time had passed while he slept. One has to take food only after completing the *sandhyavandan*.

Shriram stood up and walked towards the cave's entrance. The cave was not arranged in any particular manner, but it was very clean. There was no dust or sand in that region, hence there was no chance for dust to be deposited anywhere by the wind. When he came out, he felt the path towards the cave was a little rugged and that he should walk carefully. When he had entered it along with Gurudev, such caution did not even cross his mind. Then he had felt as though someone was carrying him in his arms. Now, walking alone outwards, he placed his feet carefully.

Wherever his eyes could see, there was only snow and nothing else. There were colorful plants and flowers here and there. Sun was shining bright in the sky. The scene that was present when he came into the cave was totally different from what he was witnessing now. This did make him feel that a lot of time had passed by. But even then, he had no idea about how much time he had spent inside the cave.

The Entrance to the Land of *Siddhas*

For some time, Shriram spent time in enjoying the beauty of nature. He saw that there was a stream near the cave. He felt like going near it. He went to the bank and liked the touch of water. The water was neither cold nor hot. It had the temperature of the water in the streams in the plains during summer. Since the valley was cold, it felt nice to touch the water. The moment he touched water, he remembered that he had to do *sandhyavandan*. Shriram immediately took bath and sat there to do *sandhya*. He offered *arghya* to Sun, completed *pradakshina* and began to do his routine *jap*. After he had offered his *jap* to the Lord and got up, he saw a young *sanyasi* standing there. He must have been twenty five or twenty six years old. Though the body looked lean and thin, the way he stood tall and strong made one feel that he was healthy and strong. He had some root in his hand. When Shriram got up, he held out the root and asked him to eat it.

Shriram replied, "Pardon me. I have come to my Gurudev. Without his permission, I cannot take anything." After having replied thus, he felt that he had divulged more than required and that refusing it was enough without stating the reason. The young *sanyasi* said, "Your Gurudev has sent me to give this to you."

A question arose in his mind as to why Gurudev had to send his representative here. He could have instructed Shriram directly, just as he had been doing till then. The moment this doubt arose, the young *sanyasi* said, "I am your *Gurubhai*. I came here on getting an instruction from the Guru. This root is very useful to *sadhaks*. This root not only satisfies hunger and thirst, but also protects the body from cold and makes it flexible for *Yog sadhana*."

Shriram's mind was partly convinced with this answer. From a different quarter of his mind, a voice said, "There is no need to be ashamed. One has to be careful." Then another message came, the import of which was to have faith in the person on whose call he had come all the way there. Shriram ate the root given by the young *sanyasi*. It had the taste of a water chestnut and Shriram was feeling contented after eating just a piece of it. Shriram asked the young *sanyasi*, "Does Gurudev live in this cave?"

Tapasvi said, "He also stays here. This is one of his many residences. He comes here at any time and goes off when there is a need elsewhere." "How long have you been living in his company?" - asked Shriram. The *Tapasvi* replied, "There is no practice of counting days, months or years here. Nobody even pays attention to this method of keeping track of time. One can only experience sunrise and sunset which is all one requires."

"Then how can one know about a person's age?" asked Shriram. The young *tapasvi* replied, "There is no need for that. Only people who have reached a certain spiritual stature can come to this place. This is the entrance to *Siddhabhoomi*. The bodies of the *sadhaks* who have attained this level are free from the effects of time and space."

Shriram was lost in thought and a call got him out to the external world. It was the call of Gurudev who was asking him to wake up. He had just uttered 'Shriram' and the moment he heard it, Shriram woke up as though someone shook him out of his deep sleep. On seeing Gurudev standing in front of him, his hands naturally got raised in the gesture of prostration. Gurudev said, "The time has come to move forward." Saying just this much Gurudev started walking after signaling Shriram to follow him. Shriram did not understand whether it was *Vaikhari* or *Para vani* in which these instructions were given. It was more possibly done such that the instruction was given through his inner consciousness. This did not require throat or voice. On Gurudev's gesture to follow him, Shriram began to walk behind him. He did not even remember about the bags he had got from Aanwalkheda. Gurudev was walking fast. The way he was walking, it felt as though he was gliding rather than walking. It looked as though he was not affected by gravitation at all. He was gliding in the air as though he was made of cotton or smoke. Shriram did not find difficulty in following him. Both of them stopped at the banks of a lake.

Divine Land: Divine Speed

Gurudev entered the lake. He was walking on the water just as he walked on the land. When he walked, neither were there any ripples in the water nor it appeared as though he placed his feet in the water. Shriram stood at the bank dumbfounded at what he was witnessing. Gurudev stopped at a *Brahmakamal* that was blooming on the other side of the lake. He touched the flower and lifted his hand. The flower automatically followed his hand. It was smaller than a normal flower and was of the shape of a bud. He picked the *Brahmakamal* and came back to the bank of the lake and gave the flower to Shriram.

The moment he touched *Brahmakamal*, Shriram felt his body growing weightless. He was not even feeling the cold. Even before, he did not shiver owing to the cold wind and snow. It was as though Gurudev's presence had enveloped his body with warmth. On taking the *Brahmakamal* into his hands, he experienced a new zeal. Whatever little fatigue he had felt because of walking fast also vanished.

His guide moved forward. Shriram followed closely behind him. He felt as though his legs were above the ground and did not feel any kind of strain in walking. In his mind, Shriram began to realize why the *siddhis* were needed. They ensured that the body did not get tired by walking on rugged roads so that one could sit and do meditation and other spiritual practices.

Gurudev who was walking ahead slowed down and said thus in reply to Shriram's thoughts – "Well, it is not just confined to that. *Siddhis* act as indicators in the journey of a *sadhak*. If one attains those *siddhis*, then one can be assured that the *sadhana* is progressing in the right direction. But one should not get stuck here. It is not essential that the level of the *sadhana* is gauged only by looking at the *siddhis*. The journey can move ahead without them too."

Shriram was following Gurudev as though his body was made of air. They would have traveled for several miles. He began to get familiarized with every nook and corner of the region. He did not have any sense of time even after traveling a hundred miles. He felt as though it took only an hour or less. That place was completely desolate. There were no signs of human presence. In spite of that he experienced a feeling that people were there and that they have gone out now. He could experience the warmth of their breath. There was a pleasant fragrance in the atmosphere.

The *mahatmas* in subtle bodies must be performing *yagya* or *agnihotra* here. Just as their bodies are subtle, so must be the entire *yagya* process. The moment Shriram realized this truth; he did not repeat his question. They circumambulated the entire place and then Gurudev stopped at a place and signaled Shriram to stop. He sat on a stone and Shriram stood in front of him with folded hands. Gurudev had assumed a physical form and hence one could touch and feel him. Through a gesture he asked Shriram to look in a certain direction.

Shriram turned his gaze in that direction. The moment his eyes fell there, he could hear the sound of *Veda mantras*. In the valley in front of them, twenty four *sanyasis* were performing *yagya* in twenty four separate *kunds*. All the *sanyasis* were of different age and physical stature. Looking at them, he felt as though their ages ranged between thirty – eighty years. Their tone and way of chanting the mantras appeared to be of a very ancient period. The body of the *tapasvis* looked healthy and strong. Even after looking at them from a distance, one would not feel that they had fasted for long periods or had subjected bodies to any self-tortuous *Tapasya*.

Special Instructions

On seeing *agnihotra*, Shriram lost his outer consciousness. Gurudev, who was seated on the stone, said, "These are *Rishisattas*. They are ever engrossed in penance and *anushthan* so as to establish *sat-dharma* (righteousness) in the world. They do not need any *sadhana* for their personal liberation. They are already in the state of liberation. They are doing the penance out of compassion for the world. To maintain the balance of the universe, there will be need for penance, *yagya* and *anushthans*. You will have to take up this responsibility."

Shriram bowed his head in response to Gurudev's words, indicating that it would be followed at all costs. Gurudev continued, "To cleanse the subtle atmosphere, it is not sufficient to perform the ritual alone. There should be life in the ritual. Only those souls who have done penance can introduce life in *yagya, anushthan* and other religious rituals. You have anyway started that great penance. You will have to exert specially to cleanse the subtle worlds and to wake up and energize the sleeping souls. I will keep guiding you as regards the methods and procedures for the same at appropriate times."

Gurudev concluded his talk with these words. The way he stopped, it appeared as though it was sufficient to say this much using the *Vaikhari vani* and the rest of the message would emerge from Shriram's inner being itself. Gurudev prepared to leave. Shriram experienced that the great souls performing the *yagya* had stood up and were approaching them. They appeared to be twenty four people earlier but now their count had increased. It appeared as though they were coming from all directions. It would be more appropriate to say that they materialized themselves there. On seeing them prostrate before Gurudev with faith and humility, Shriram also prostrated at his feet.

Gurudev said, "From now on, listen to the voice of your inner self. Whatever inspiration surges forth from within, follow it and move in that direction." Shriram heard this instruction. He also heard the assurance that wherever Shriram went, his protection and the *Rishi sattas'* purifying *tantra* would be available. An inner inspiration arose that asked him to continue on this path and go to Gangotri and spend some time there. It did not take much time to reach Gangotri. After holding the *Brahmakamal* in his hands, Shriram felt weightless at all times. He could increase or decrease the speed by mere thought. The moment he took the *Brahmakamal* into his hands, he had obtained an instruction from within to stop using it after going out of the Himalayan region. Shriram remembered this instruction. Shriram traveled at the speed of wind and reached Gangotri. He spent two – three days there and returned to Aanwalkheda. Taiji was happy on seeing her son safe and sound.

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Pilgrimage to the Holy Land of Deeksha

It was the morning of August 15, 1930. After finishing his *Sandhya*, Shriram came to pay his respects to his mother. Taiji was giving some instructions outside. After paying his respects, Shriram stood there. Taiji understood that her son wanted to speak to her. She finished speaking to the visitor and came in with Shriram. She asked – "What do you want to say?" Shriram hesitatingly, yet insistently asked – "If I promise to come back on time, will you allow me to go to Banaras for a month?" Listening to a request in this style, Taiji was overwhelmed. Without thinking too much, she gave her permission. The date 15th August carried no significance then. Pandit Nehru had unfurled the national flag on 26th January during the Lahore session of Congress and it was this date that was declared as Independence Day. But for those in the field of spirituality, this date had its significance. About four years back, the Divine over-mental consciousness had manifested on earth on November 26. Maharshi Aurobindo had called this day – *Siddhi Divas*. He had called this as the over-mental descent in earth consciousness. In brief, over-mental is the plane of consciousness over-arching the illumined mind and intuition – just the supreme plane of super mind. It was in the same year that Shriram's *Purashcharanas* had started. 15th August was the birthday of Sri Aurobindo. After *Siddhi Divas*, he had stopped meeting people on a regular basis. Shriram was aware of Sri Aurobindo's life and vision. He had read Sri Aurobindo's writings available in Hindi translation.

Receives Permission for Journey

Once he received Taiji's permission to visit Banaras, Shriram started to pack his stuff. This month-long pilgrimage was by far the longest away from home he had undertaken up until then. He did not have experience in packing for such a travel. His father used to go away for long periods of time for conducting *Bhagawat Katha* and it was his mother who used to take care of the arrangements. She had good experience. Hence, Taiji arranged for clothes, bedding, food that would remain eatable for long time, money etc. For four-five days, Shriram was talking to his companions about the freedom movement. He explained to them the course of action so that their activities could continue in his absence. He insisted on conducting *Prabhat pheris*, exercises in the morning every day. He advised them to take immediate decisions while facing new unforeseen situations and keep Mother India's head high by their deeds and conduct."

Sri Paliwal of Agra had given him a letter of introduction to Sri Ganga Babu of Kashi (Varanasi), who was a member of the Theosophical Society. The letter requested Ganga Babu (Ganga Sharan Sinha) to make arrangements for Shriram's stay in Kashi. In addition to being a member of the Theosophical society, he also participated in the activities of the Congress. This participation was due to friends and acquaintances;

otherwise his focus was mainly on spirituality. On the eve of his departure from Aanwalkheda, Taiji reminded Shriram that he was permitted to stay away only for a month. She asked him not to extend his stay beyond that. Before this reminder, she had satisfied herself over the arrangements for his stay in Kashi.

When the 19-year old Shriram got down at Kashi Railway station, he was surrounded by the *Pandas* of Kashi. After forcing himself out of their clutches, he went towards Vishram Ghat, instead of going to Ganga Babu's house. There was a small hut near the Ghat. The door was open and many people were sitting there. Suddenly Shriram felt an urge to go inside and he followed the instinct. Amongst the people sitting there, a sturdy monk was sitting in *Padmasana*. From the people surrounding him he came to know that his name was Swami Shuddhanand and that he had been staying there for many decades. Shriram paid his respects and sat down amongst the congregation. As he sat down, Swami Shuddhanand looked at him and said – "You have come Shriram! First go and take bath. By then, Ganga Babu will also be available here. He will be coming here soon."

Shriram had not discussed with anyone his mission or about Ganga Babu. He was surprised to hear Ganga Babu's name from Swamiji. Swamiji understood the surprise and said "Don't be surprised. He comes here regularly at this time. After he came back in about half an hour, Swami Shuddhanand and the devotees were sitting as before. Of course, some new people had also joined the congregation.

Swamiji saw Shriram and spoke to a middle-aged man sitting near him – "Ganga Babu, your guest is here." Ganga Babu greeted him. Shriram greeted him in response and asked – "How did you come to know that I was here. Who told you that I was your guest?"

Ganga Babu said "Swamiji told me. I was to come here in the evening. Swamiji came to my house and said that Paliwalji has sent you here. He also told me that you are to stay here for a month and I had to arrange for it. Now come with me. If you like the arrangements I have made, you can stay there; otherwise, I will make alternate arrangements."

Swami Shuddhanand was listening to this conversation. The way he was sitting among the people, it didn't appear that he could have left them and gone out and come back and sat there after informing Ganga Babu. Also, Ganga Babu's house was 3 kilometers away and it would take half an hour for an ordinary person to reach there. Later, Ganga Babu told Shriram that Swami Shuddhanand had the *siddhi* to exist in two or three places at the same time. He could create another body at will and do his work. Shriram asked "Isn't it a waste of divine energy to use it thus?"

Ganga Babu said "Swamiji never misuses his powers. If he used it to inform me about your arrival, it definitely has some reason." Later Swamiji clarified to Shriram "At times, these miracles have to be performed to strengthen the faith of people." He added "Shriram, not only I but many other realized souls are aware of your *sadhana*. You will meet many people in Varanasi who will awaken your spiritual potentialties. They will give proofs of your capabilities. These proofs will help you go forward on your path."

Shriram liked the place that Ganga Babu had shown him. Many saints and holy men lived on the way to the banks of Ganga from that place. He liked the place not because many holy men lived there, but because the place was isolated. Ganga Babu had first shown his house and in the same breath had shown a couple of other places and Shriram had liked this one. Shriram settled into this place situated in Baans Phatak area. He started his *sadhana* and *swadhyay* from that very day.

Meeting with Gandh Baba

A little distance away from the place where Shriram lived was the *kutir* of Swami Vishuddhanand in Hanuman Ghat area. Famed as 'Gandh Baba' and an exponent of Solar Science, Swami Vishuddhanand had stayed in this place from the time he came to Kashi. His fame had spread far and wide from this place because of his miraculous occult powers and his relation to Gyan Ganj – a hermitage inTibet in the astral plane, where realized souls lived. As the number of devotees increased, he had moved to Maldahiya area. Now this place is called – 'Vishuddhanand grove'. When Shriram visited Kashi, Swami Vishuddhanand had moved to the new locality, but would often visit the old place.

As he went to take his morning bath, Shriram came to know about Swami Vishuddhanand. He finished his *sandhya* rituals on the banks of Ganga. After the *upasana*, a thought arose in his mind to visit Swami Vishuddhanand. 'Vishuddhanand Kutir' was a large three-storied building. Many of his disciples stayed there. Shriram entered the house and introduced himself. A *sadhak* from Braj area had come to the 'eternal city' The disciples were overwhelmed to see this visitor from afar and immediately informed their Master. As expected, Shriram was called immediately to meet Swami Vishuddhanand.

There were many people in Baba's room. They all were sitting on an ochre shade yellow carpet. A leopard skin was spread on it and Baba was sitting on it. He was dark colored, well-built with hypnotic eyes, raised nose and a flowing beard and his resplendent face attracted anyone at first sight. Shriram paid his respects and sat among the devotees. As he sat, he heard someone whispering "The flowers in front of Baba have no smell. Baba can create any fragrance in those flowers."

Shriram listened silently. He said nothing. Baba was talking with the people around him and his eyes fell on Shriram. They immediately lit up and he asked – "Son, when did you come? What do you want? What fragrance do you want?"

The Fragrance of Soul

Shriram replied "The fragrance of the lotus of my soul." Baba said "You yourself will have to work to attain it" Shriram humbly pleaded "Please bless me so that I can attain it." Baba was very pleased to hear that and clapped his hands in response. After talking to others for sometime, he turned to Shriram and said "You are an *Upasak* (worshipper) of *Savita*. I use the powers of the Sun - the physical manifestation of the same *Savita*, to show the miracles. This is needed to inculcate faith in the people towards the Creator."

He continued – "I feel that you will understand all this in due course. Your guiding force is holding your finger and making you walk on the right path." After talking for a long time, Swamiji said "Keep coming here. You can come here anytime" and then he invited "Come near me" Shriram moved closer and Baba asked "What is your favorite fragrance?"

Shriram replied "Sandal". Baba asked again "Why?" Shriram replied "I like it because the more you grind it, more fragrance it emits." Baba was very pleased and he said "Smell your palms". Shriram smelled his palms and he found them smelling sandal fragrance. Baba said "This smell will appear whenever you want it. Those whom you touch, will be blessed. Treat this as a boon from the sages of Gyan Ganj."

Shriram reverently thanked Swamiji and came back to his place. Ganga Babu came in the afternoon to see him. When Shriram told him of his visit to Swami Vishuddhanand in the morning, Ganga Babu said that he was a Yogi endowed with supernatural powers. He also said that if Baba were to use his powers, he could eradicate poverty and hunger from the entire country. The power that he was talking about was the power of Baba to materialize any object that he wished. Baba said that this power was a science. Shriram was excited to hear about this power. He decided that he would talk to Baba on this. He also wondered that if anything could be materialized by the Baba, then why not ask for the country's independence itself?

The Idol of Mother India

Shriram spent the next day roaming around Kashi. He visited Dashashwamedha Ghat, Manikarnika Ghat and the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Tired, he came back to his place in the evening and slept. He got up early in the morning as usual i.e. 2 AM. After getting up he left for his bath in the Ganga. By the time his morning *sadhana* had been done, the Sun had risen in the East. After strolling on the banks of the river for some time, he went to Vishuddh Kuteer. It appeared that an inner inspiration was forcing him to go there.

There were only four or five people around Baba. After they had left, Shriram inched forward. Baba asked him "Do you also want to learn the science of producing fragrances?" Shriram shook his head and said "No". Baba was looking at him expectantly as if waiting to hear what

Shriram would want. The young Shriram asked "Baba, can you manifest anything out of nothing?"

Baba replied "Where do I manifest anything? It has already been manifested by Rajarajeshwari. The entire creation is latently manifest in every particle. Every particle has the Sun, the Moon, the stars and the entire universe. If the grace of Vishwanath is there, it can be manifested right here, right now."

He then stopped for a moment and continued "The main object of Yoga cannot be seen by the physical eyes. Whatever is important and meaningful is not visible to the physical eyes. It can be seen only by a paradigm shift of consciousness in the causal plane. The miracles of material science are visible. It has its principles and the science of yoga has its own secrets. The yogic science was known in every village/town of India in the past. India had reached the pinnacles of spiritual and material excellence by the virtue of this knowledge. The science that I use has a blend of both these. The energy that today's science is extolling has its source in the Sun."

All the physical objects have their source in the rays of the Sun. I will now tell you how they are manifested from the light. Saying this, Baba called out to a servant and asked him to get a lens from an inner room. Shriram was observing all this silently. Baba asked him "What do you want to see?"

Shriram replied "An idol of Mother India." Baba asked him to get some cotton from the packing of a box of grapes. Shriram pulled out a little cotton from the packing material and gave it to Baba. Baba kept the wad of cotton in front of him. Using the lens, he focused the Sun's rays flowing in from a window on to the cotton. In a few moments, the cotton started changing its shape. First it became stiff and then took on the form of granite stone. From the various angles of the stone, shapes emerged in different sizes. Within moments, the wad of cotton was turned into a five inch high idol of Mother India. She was astride on a lion and carried a flag by Her side. The right hand was raised up as a token of reassurance and the left hand rested on the lion's back.

Baba asked him to touch the idol and feel. Shriram touched it and felt as if it was made of solid granite stone. Baba told him "You can keep this idol. It will always remain in this shape and will not deteriorate." After this demonstration, Shriram asked "Baba, if everything can be manifested through sunlight, then why the problem of poverty and hunger in the country can't be solved? One could prepare food and medicines for lakhs of needy people in the country by harnessing this miraculous energy."

Baba replied – "Your emotions are well-meaning. But divine powers are not used for bringing about such radical changes in the physical plane. If these powers are used to change the *prarabdha karma* (destiny) of people or to change the laws of Karma, then it would be an uncalled for intervention in the harmonious functioning of the universe." Shriram got the answer for why *siddhis* (divine powers) should not be used for selfish or small aims. Shriram stayed there for some time and came back. On his return to his place of stay he heard that a big fair – *Mahavarani Mela* – was going to be held at the confluence of two small streams Varana and Asi which then join the Ganga. Hence, the place is called 'Varanasi'.

Meeting with Siddhi Maata

Shriram left for the fair. On the route to the confluence, two temples of Lord Shiva – Vasishtheshwar and Riteshwar were situated. These days, many people reside in this area, but then the place was still desolate and a few *sadhus* stayed here and there. There were no huts or monasteries. The monks would stay either in a temple or on the banks of Ganga. Shriram met Swami Shankaranand near Vasishtheshwar temple. While talking to him, the topic of Swami Vishuddhanand came up. In the same context, Swami Shankaranand spoke about another great soul.

This saintly lady used to stay in an ordinary house in Khalispur area. She was very reluctant to meet people and was mostly immersed in her *sadhana* and *Bhajan*. People called her 'Siddhi Maata'. Hearing extraordinary things about her, Shriram went to meet her. She initially was reluctant to meet him. However, on hearing that Shriram had come from Braj and was a devotee of Gayatri, she agreed to meet him. While talking to him, she covered her head with her saree. She was a devotee of Krishna and she believed that after seeing Him, she should not look at anyone else. She did not want to use the eyes that had seen her Lord for seeing earthly objects. This emotion can't be justified through logic; but an emotion is an emotion! Shriram was not offended by her behavior. He was overwhelmed on hearing special information about her.

Siddhi Maata had been staying in Kashi for about 20 years. During this period, she did not go out and visit any holy person. She was born in Bengal. After coming to Kashi, she had never been to Bengal. Her daily rituals in Kashi involved spending all her time in Bhajan and worship. She would not usually talk to anyone, but for some reason she started telling Shriram the story of her life and her *sadhana*.

Shriram was touched to see the dedication she had towards her *sadhana*. He felt that popularity amongst people was an obstacle on the path of *sadhana*. A *sadhak* should desist from seeking fame, success and popularity. Thoughts were racing through his mind. Siddhi Mata said –"A *sadhak* on the path of *Bhakti* should not meet with people; but your path is different. You have the responsibility of teaching people. Hence do not impose my restrictions on yourself."

Siddhi Mata had the capability to grant boons, but she used them rarely. She had once prayed to save the life of a man who had come under the wheels of a horse cart. This was an incident from her village. The person was cured but Siddhi Mata could not eat for many days. The people of Khalispura area believed that if she looked compassionately at anyone, he would prosper in all spheres of life.
Strolling on the banks of the river near the confluence took most of Shriram's time that day. This continued for a couple of days. Once in a few days, he went to Swami Vishuddhanand's Kuteer. He met many great people of Kashi there. There would be saints who were famous and also those who were not so well known and confined themselves to their path of *sadhana*. After talking to them, he felt an inspiration to circumambulate the city and see its places of interest.

The Panchakoshi Parikrama (Circumambulation)

A *sadhu* visiting Baba had told Shriram – "There is a difference between tourist places and places of pilgrimage. A tourist place need not be a place of pilgrimage. If your nature is of a *sadhak*, then keep your consciousness open and you will know the difference by the specific vibrations of each place."

This sentence from the *sadhu* was like an aphorism. The circumambulation was necessary to identify the important places from the perspective of *sadhana*; else how would Shriram have made the distinction between highly energized places and those places that were devoid of energy? He prepared for the circumambulation with a couple of other people. The *panchakoshi parikrama* (circumambulation) was basically a circular track of about 70 Kms. It took about 5 days to cover the entire route and almost all the important places of Varanasi were covered in it. As there were some other members with Shriram, so he did not have to make any special arrangements for himself.

In the months of *Margashirsha* and *Phalgun*, the *parikrama* is a part of the festival. Many people also do *parikrama* in *Purushottam Mas* (extra month) and on Shivratri. The devout would do *parikrama* whenever they found a chance. Shriram and his group started off by taking bath in Manikarnika ghat and visiting Gyan Vapi and the shrine of Vishwanath. One member of this group was Swami Vidyanand Puri, another was Shiva Brahmachari and the other two were householders. After observing the conditions of Gyan Vapi and Vishwanath temple, Shriram's mind was agitated. Shiva Brahmachari said "Why do you feel sad? Once these temples were the pride of the country and now they are in ruins. If God wishes, then they will all be rejuvenated."

Shriram replied "The sadness is at the pitiable condition of this country where a handful of invaders came and destroyed the land of the land of *Rishis*"

The Vishwanath temple was a crowded place even then. The devotees visiting the temple would get caught in the tricks of the *Pandas* (so called priests) and would lose money. The temple was lacking in any form of grandeur except for the *Kalash* installed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. There was a small *pindi* (piece of stone) kept in the temple. Once, there used to be a big *Shivaling* (idol of Lord Shiva) there. The invaders had ransacked the temple and broken the idol and thrown it in a nearby well (*vapi*). Even today, a mosque exists right next to the well. This is called Gyan Vapi. Many devotees consider this too a place of pilgrimage and worship.

Temples Do Not Get Destroyed

Shriram felt very depressed by the time he reached Annapurna temple. As he was climbing the steps of the temple, he saw a beggar. The beggar was not asking for alms. He was just observing the visitors carefully. Everyone who met his eyes would try to evade them immediately. His eyes had a special sparkle. When Shriram met his eyes, he was neither surprised nor did he try to evade the gaze. The beggar said "The temples you are looking at are dead. No one can destroy live temples. Don't be sad. Think of building live temples in the future. Invoke the gods in the statues consecrated in the old temples."

Shriram was surprised at how the beggar realized the turmoil in his mind. Not only did this strange person understand his mind, he had also given a solution. He felt that he was no ordinary beggar, but a realized person in the garb of a beggar. After the *panchakoshi parikrama* was completed, he opened his mind in front of Swami Vishuddhanand. He asked about temples being attacked, looted and destroyed. Swamiji said "Rituals are not enough to infuse life into the idol of the deity.

The atmosphere of the temple should be brimming with the elevated consciousness force of *sadhana*. When the temple is made vibrant in this manner, the divine forces are happy to reside there."

He continued "A person with evil *samskaras* cannot enter either Siddhashram or Gyanganj located in the *Siddha* region of Tibetan Himalayas. The vibrations of these places keep such a vile person hundreds of miles away from the place. If one wants to test the validity of these places, one need not go to those inaccessible places. Rishikesh is certainly accessible. If one goes up from there and beyond Neelkanth Mahadev temple, one finds a village Siddhapura. There are about 40 to 50 huts there, but they are all empty. Ordinary people cannot cross the boundary of this village. If one is foolhardy and enters the village, he will see wild animals like tigers, lions, snakes etc. It appears as if these creatures are guarding the village from anyone who wants to enter it. Only accomplished and deserving *sadhaks* are not harmed by them. Only those who are permitted by the yogis and saints of Siddhapura can enter; and they are also blessed by these realized souls. The temples or places of *tapa* remain full of divine energy due to the *sadhaks* residing there. There are many other similar *Siddha Peeths*. They cannot be recognized by ordinary eyes. People do not even get a desire to visit the place. Even if a desire arises, then circumstances change such that it becomes impossible to go there."

About the Vishwanath temple, Baba said "The energy that was present one thousand - twelve hundred years back has weakened and vanished with time as there are no *sadhaks* who can maintain the intensity of the energy of the place. The Golden temple (of Kashi Viswanath) does not have the same power anymore". He also said -"There will be many more temples in the name of Kashi Vishwanath. Some of those might be bigger and grander than the one in Kashi. Yet, they will all be temples where one merely visits to behold the idol and mechanically worship it."

The important places that attracted Shriram in his *parikrama* were: *Akshay Vat*, Annapurna temple, Tulsi Ghat and Kabir Chaura. He was not satisfied even after knowing the spiritual mystery of Vishwanath temple. The explanation given by Swami Vishuddhanand was correct in its place, but the miserable condition of the temple was very heartrending from even a cultural point of view. During this travel, he came to know of all the places in Kashi – the small and the big.

Sadho Sahaj Samadhi Bhali

Shriram had a strange experience on reaching Kabir Chaura. Saint Kabir lived there long ago. To break the superstition that those who died in Kashi attain heaven and those who died elsewhere go to hell, he deliberately moved out of Kashi during his last days. He stayed in Kabir chuara before he left Kashi. The place where he sat has been carefully maintained as a temple uptill now as if an idol were installed there. Near Kabir's seat, his cap and a painting of his Guru Swami Ramanand have been kept. Shriram was lost in himself on entering the place. He could see Kabir sitting on his seat and many devotees sitting in front of him. Kabir was singing a few lines to them. The words probably were titled '*Sadho sahaj samadhi bhali*' and the lines exhorted people to serve God through their noble actions. For some moments, Shriram felt as if he himself were singing.

The *Dashaashwamedh* and *Manikarnika ghats* are famous for their historic value. Shriram visited the *Dashaashwamedh ghat* many times on his way to the *Varana Sangam* (confluence). It was about 2.5 kilometers away from the confluence. According to legends, Brahma had conducted ten *Ashwamedha Yagyas* at this place. The visitors to Kashi mainly chose this *ghat* for their bath. *Manikarnika ghat* also had historic importance. From the *Bhairav Kund* situated on the banks, water is taken out once after every eight days. Fresh water springs forth again from some inner source automatically to fill the *Kund* (a small pool).

On reaching Tulsi Ghat, Shriram had a strange experience at a place where Goswami Tulsidas – the author of Ram Charita Manas –shed his physical sheath. There is an idol of Hanuman, established by Goswamiji, on the banks of the river. Near the idol, where Tulsidas used to sit, his *Charan Padukas* (wooden slippers) were placed. This was the place where Tulsidasji used to recite his magnum opus to the people. The legend has it that Hanuman was always present in some or other form to listen (secretly) the story of his Lord. One day, during the recital, Tulsidas recognized Hanuman by some specific gesture. It could also be said that Hanuman himself gave some hint about his presence to Tulsidas. An elated Tulsidas worshipped Hanuman there. It was then that Hanuman promised him that wherever the recital of Ram Charita Manas is done, Hanuman would invariably be present there and listen to the recital from the beginning to the end.

Shriram remembered this legend when he was on Tulsi ghat. He looked at the idol carefully. He got involved so much in the idol that he lost himself in Hanuman. The idol responded. It appeared as if the idol moved from its place slowly. Yet, the idol remained where it was. Actually, an image emerged out of the idol and then another and then another. Slowly, the entire army of Hanuman emerged and started to jump up and down, as was their innate nature. As Shriram observed this army, he became aware that this was the army that had vanquished Ravan. Ravan was the demon who had held sway over the three worlds and had even won mastery over time. Yet, this army had defeated Ravan. If Lord had wished, he could have finished Ravan in the twinkle of an eye, but he chose these lowly animals to accomplish his mission. After remaining in this state of trance, the images merged back into the idol and everything became normal.

Another strange experience happened to Shriram when he went to visit Kashi Karvat in the by lanes of Kashi. Now, a well exists here. A Shivaling is installed in this well. The well is closed and it is pitch dark inside. Only during the times of worship and cleaning are the coverings of the well opened and a priest climbs down and worships the deity. At other times, people offer flowers to the plinth around the well. At one time a cutting saw was fixed inside the well and people used to jump over it and commit suicide. There was a belief that those who died there achieved *Sayujya Mukti* (salvation).

The Secret of Kashi Karvat

When Shriram visited Kashi Karvat, he heard the legends about the place from people. He was not interested in myths and legends. He was thinking about this strange place which glorified death by suicide. He was wondering how this belief of suicide leading to Moksha originated. What was the reason behind this? While searching for an answer, a wry smile came on his lips, but he then became serious and thought that there might be a meaning for this.

A professor of Banaras Hindu University (BHU) had also come there. He found Shriram's graveness special and casually introduced himself and started a conversation. His name was Shivraj Gautam. Gautam was also from near Vrindavan- from the village Mor. He had been in Kashi for the past 20 years. After the founding of BHU, he became associated with it. He asked the reason for Shriram's sadness. Shriram replied "How many superstitions are there in our society! In their greed for heaven or *Moksha*, people are ready to even give up their lives. Is this sensible?"

Gautam replied "If you look at it from another viewpoint, Kashi Karvat is a symbol of indifference towards life and accepting it in its various forms." It appeared that Gautam was expecting this question and had come prepared with the answer. He continued "In our country, life is accepted in many forms. Death is also one aspect of life. Any civilization that has developed and gained access to higher dimensions of consciousness does not negate the truth of death. In our country, there is no end to diversity. Kashi Karvat is a form of self-sacrifice. It can be considered as a brave attempt to go beyond death.

"Initially, some *sadhak* of a high order might have attempted it. At that time, death was not made so simple that it would inspire everyone to die. What happened later can certainly be called suicide." Gautam was defending the start of Kashi Karvat, but even he accepted that with time, escapism and cowardice to face life were conjoined with crimes like suicide.

Shriram accepted Gautam's viewpoint. When a tradition gets degenerated, attempts are made to refine and correct it. While discussing such efforts, he said "The birth of Kabir in the middle ages was to rid the society of such distortions in tradition."

Gautam accepted this. They both then discussed about the university, happenings in the city and religious matters for a long time. After talking to Gautam, Shriram understood better the happenings of the city.

When Shriram was in Kashi, Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviyaji was in jail. It was a co-incidence that on the very day Shriram left for Kashi, Malaviyaji and others were arrested in Delhi. They were accused of attending a Working Committee meeting of the Congress which was banned by the government. Before this, some students, teachers and employees of the university had participated in the non co-operation movement.

To understand the atmosphere of the university, Shriram visited it even though he was not in any position to interfere or help. There was also an emotional reason for meeting people there. This was the place of *sadhana* of the great man who had given *Gayatri Mantra Deeksha* to Shriram five years back. He was also reminiscing the scenes of an even earlier date when he had participated in its founding ceremony.

Turmoil in Hindu University

The arrest of Malaviyaji had created a state of anxiety and anger in the atmosphere of university. Prof. Acharya Anand Shankar Bapu Bhai Dhruv was the Pro-Vice Chancellor of the university. He was facing many problems. The government had stopped grants to the university in view of the support towards the non-cooperation movement and increasing nationalistic fervor on the campus. Acharya Dhruv went to Lucknow to resolve the pressing problems. The officers there told him of the British Government's concerns. The British had decided that the university was a hot-bed for the agitational politics of the country. Their view was that it could be brought on to the right path only by suspending the grants to the university. Acharya Dhruv tried very hard to convince the government officials that the university was a centre of national excellence. Its aim was to create ideal citizens of the country through knowledge, religion and morality. It had no active links with politics. He pointed out that the nationalistic movement had created an environment from which no one could remain unaffected and hence it was affecting the university too. This argument found no favor with the British officers. Confusion prevailed in the university.

Shriram felt the frenzy and the enthusiasm prevailing in the atmosphere there. He also felt that he should also imbibe the impressions of this land of inspiration. As he was leaving the campus, a thought came to his mind that if an opportunity arose, he too should establish a similar university dedicated to Indian culture and the manifestation of a new era. The university should be kept away from political influence. The thought gave rise to another question – How would it be possible? This was followed by another stream which said his angelic guide would convert this thought into a resolve and achieve it when the time was ripe.

Malaviyaji was in Naini central jail in at Prayag (Allahabad). Some antagonistic elements were trying to use this opportunity to close down the university. The opposition from those elements had always existed, but they had not expected the university to start functioning and establish itself. They had thought that since there were no resources, no support from people, no backing of rich industrialists; the resolve of setting up of the university would die down soon. But their evil designs were not fulfilled. There were so many small contributions from common people that its visionary's idea came to bear fruit. After this, the ill-wishers were spending sleepless nights over this. Even the local congress committee had many such people in it. They started designing various schemes to disgrace the university.

Malaviyaji's address

In December 1929, Malaviyaji had delivered an inspiring speech to the graduating students of the university at the convocation function, calling upon them to dedicate themselves completely to the cause of the nation. It was considered a milestone speech in the history of the student movement. In it, Malaviyaji had said "On leaving the university, you must dedicate yourselves to the spread of mass education and teach people the importance of hygiene and cleanliness. Establish cooperative societies in your villages. Do not hesitate to offer whatever sacrifices are needed for the freedom movement. Strengthen in yourselves the love for freedom and the will to sacrifice for the country."

A few days after this convocation, the entire country responded to Gandhiji's call of non- cooperation movement. The students of the university also jumped into this movement. This provided an ideal opportunity for those who wanted to uproot the university. They attached themselves to the student movement and started acts of vandalism and started looting and destroying property. Naturally, the complaints were against the students. In the beginning of 1930, the local congressmen had created so much disturbance that Malaviyaji was thinking about asking the students to isolate themselves from the movement. However, the secrets of the congressmen did not stay hidden for long and their conspiracies were brought out in the public. This news reached the ears of Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, who was the president of Congress then. The Sardar reprimanded the disruptive elements and asked the local unit to rein in these forces. At that time, the order of the Congress President used to be no less than a king's order. This order helped rein in the anti-university activists.

Discussions were held all over the university. These were centered around the present situation and past activities. In this visit, Shriram tried to understand from close quarters the direction of contemporary politics and nationalist movement. He visited the university for a couple of days. During this period someone told that a saintly lady had come to Kashi, who mostly remained in a state of *Samadhi* and suggested that Shriram should have her *darshan*. Shriram's curiosity was aroused on hearing about *Samadhi* state. He asked for the address and found that she was staying in some devotee's place in Ramapura. She was accompanied by her husband. They did not have any kids. It was said that they did not lead the usual relationship as a husband and wife. She was in a state of *Bhavasamadhi* during her wedding too. Very few knew her actual name. People believed that she was an incarnation of Meera. Even her husband addressed her as 'Mother'

Meeting with Maa Anandamayi

Shriram decided to meet her and set off towards her place of stay. The Mother, whose real name was Nirmala Devi, stayed on the second floor of the house. About twenty-five to thirty people were standing outside. As usual, the Mother was in a state of trance when Shriram reached there. Her attendants said that she would not meet anyone for some time. On coming out of the trance, she would come and show herself to the devotees. The devotees waited for a long time. The trance was broken after about two hours and she came out. Shriram felt that he had never seen a *Tejaswi* (effulgent) woman like her. In his first *darshan* itself, Shriram felt that a divine spirit had manifested in the personality of Nirmalaji.

Swami Dayanand, who was spreading the essence of *Sanatana Dharma,* was also present there. To pursue his mission, he had started Bharat

Dharma Mahamandal. Many famous *Sadhus* and *Mahants* (head priests) were members of this organization. After this organization, many other religious organizations sprouted. The pioneers of organizations like Vidwat parishad, Dharma Pracharak Mandal, Sanatan Dharma Pratinidhi Sabha, etc were trained in Swami Dayanand's hermitage. Swami Dayanand told the gathered devotees she was the Divine Mother manifest in physical form and that she had incarnated to give the world the message of divine love and devotion.

Shriram wanted to talk to her, but he could not find the opportunity. The next day, he went to the house of Maa's devotee at around noon. Luckily, not many people were around and the Mother was not in a trance. She agreed to talk to Shriram in front of all those who were there.

Shriram asked – "Mother, who you are?" She replied "Who am I? Whatever you think would be correct." Next question was "People say that you are always in Samadhi. Is this *Savikalpa* or *Nirvikalpa*?" She replied "I am not a learned person. I have no knowledge of the scriptures. Hence I cannot clarify on the state of my *Samadhi* in the terms of scriptures."

One of the assembled person asked "Mother, are there any *Siddhapurushas* in this age also?" The Mother replied "What has happened in this age? They exist at all times. This world exists because of those who are one with Brahma. Without them, it would have disintegrated."

The same person asked again – "In spite of being home to such enlightened souls, why is it that our country is being ruled by outsiders?" The Mother replied – "It is the Lord's will that it be so. He is enjoying the *Tamas* aspect of his play. Now that the *Rajas* aspect of the play has awakened, you are seeing the freedom movement. In a few years, the country will be free."

Shriram asked "Would we not have to work for it? Would the country become free without any effort from its people?" The reply came "Efforts have to be made. The Lord is activating his *Rajas* aspect. People will come forward to fight for independence. Many a times they would be working for it unwittingly. Indolence and sloth are the faces of *Tamas*. One does not have to make any efforts to be in *Tamas*. Effort is needed for the activation of *Rajas*."

To the question "Would our country ever enter *Satwa* state also?" The reply was "Of course it will. In this state, divine ambiance would prevail in all directions. The country would regain its glory– that glory for which the Lord has chosen it."

In the midst of this conversation, the Mother again went into a trance. The people sat there waiting for her to come out of the trance. In the state of trance, she would sit with her eyes closed. There was an extraordinary peace on her face. It appeared as if every pore of her being was remembering the Lord. She was in that state for half an hour. As she opened her eyes, her gaze fell on Shriram and she asked "When are you going back Shriram? I will again meet you in Haridwar. You would be establishing a unique socio-spiritual commune on the banks of Ganga." Shriram was astounded as there were no plans about Haridwar in his mind at that time. He also realized again that the acts and words of saints were inscrutable.

Shriram had not expected this question. On hearing this question, he thought and said "I will be leaving in a couple of days." Though there were 8-10 ten days left in his original plan of staying for a month, he had been thinking about returning earlier from the previous evening itself. After seeing the turmoil in the university, he had understood the problem of the country better and he was eager to go back to Anwalkheda. He was contemplating again and again that when the country was waking up, when the atmosphere was surcharged with nationalistic fervor, it was not proper for him to prolong his pilgrimage. Hence, he thought of going back and this decision got expressed in front of the Mother.

Back Home

He visited a few other important places over the next two days. Then he returned to Anwalkheda via Sarnath. On seeing that her son had come back earlier than planned, Taiji was surprised. She was joyous to see her son after a gap of three weeks. She caressed him and asked "Did you not eat well in Kashi? You have lost weight and look weak." A mother always feels that her son has gone weak when he is not around her, but even Shriram's friends expressed the same opinion. Shriram always was of a slender build. Looking at his face, one could not say whether he had become weaker or stronger. The concern of his friends showed their affection for him. He asked all the volunteers to come to usual meeting place in the evening. In the evening, every one of them was present in the room in Haveli (Shriram's house).

His companions thought that Shriram would tell them about his trip to Banaras. But nothing like that happened. The moment the meeting commenced, he asked about the activities that had happened with respect to the freedom movement. The young volunteers had distributed pamphlets and pasted stickers during Shriram's absence. They had contacted the people in nearby villages. They had educated the illiterate and even taught some people to pen their signature. After hearing this report, Shriram said, 'Along with these creative activities, we have to take steps to show active opposition against the British rule. We should stage some demonstrations so that people feel that the youth have warrior-like courage and that they are ready to offer themselves for the cause. This will inspire others and create enthusiasm to work for the movement.'

Participation in the Freedom Struggle

In those days, the achievements of Bhagat Singh were a source of inspiration. He had become the icon for the youth. The killing of Sanders, bombing the central legislative assembly, looting the weapons etc had filled the youth with new zeal. The Non-Cooperation Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi had kept itself separate from these violent activities of Bhagat Singh. But there were many revolutionaries who were inclined to encourage both kinds of activities. The army of youngsters in Aanwalkheda took interest in both kinds of activities. They did not use weapon, but they certainly showed their skill in cutting telephone lines and troubling the policemen, hoodwinking the police and other officers. Shriram increased the pace of writing his patriotic compositions. These inspiring poems were mostly printed in newspaper named 'Sainik'. These poems were printed under his name with a suffix of 'Mutt'. There is a story behind how this suffix came to be associated with him. More on that will be given in the appropriate context.

Cruel and oppressive actions of the Jagirdars, Thakurs and Sahukars towards the people in the villages were similar to the tyranny of British officers in the cities. The slavery was not one-sided; in fact it became the tendency. The mentality of enslaving the people had seeped into the Indians from the White people. A businessman named Biradichand used to come to Aanwalkheda from Agra to lend money on interest to those in need. A farmer named Kamal Singh was his agent in the village. He used to do all the transactions in the name of Biradichand. The interest rates were levied such that a person who had taken a loan of hundred rupees would spend his entire life in repaying the interest itself, while the principal remained as such. Because of this, children of some families ended up as bonded laborers with Biradichand. They were given minimal food, clothing and shelter. Several such bonded laborers stayed in one room. Several children ended up working on the farm day and night. Their life was spent in farming and ploughing. There were six such bonded laborers in and around Aanwalkheda.

When the 'army' of Shriram was working on strategies for the movement, their attention fell on these young children. There was a suggestion to free these children from the clutches of the landlord so as to teach these *Desi* (local) Britons their lesson. This would also send a clear message to their British masters who were supporting the tyranny. The plan was made ready to free the children. Among the six children, four were in two farms and two were in the landlord's house. Natthu, Vrindavan, Gopinath and Ram Saran were asked to take charge of freeing these children. They went to the farm several times under various pretexts and developed acquaintance with the children on the farm. They asked them whether they wanted to be liberated from the labor. Nobody gave a negative reply but they told about their helpless state and cried. Natthu and others gave the entire report to Shriram. After contemplation, it was decided that the desire to get freed is sufficient. The rest of the strategy could be planned easily.

Battle against *Desi* Britons

In the first phase, a letter was prepared. This was written in the name of Bhagat Singh Brigade and addressed to Biradichand, asking him to release the bonded laborers kept in his house within three days. It was written in the letter that it was a warning and if it was not heeded, he would have to face the subsequent consequences. It was written in the letter that 'This very night, the laborers kept in the fields will have to be released.'

It took two days for the letter to reach Biradichand. The day the letter was written, Natthu and Ram Saran went to one of the farms. Vrindavan and Gopi went to the other farm. They did not have any kind of trouble in escaping with these 4 children because Kamal Singh (agent of Biradichand) or his other associates had not even dreamt that the bonded children would try to escape or would be freed by someone. Natthu wrote one more letter under the name of Bhagat Singh Brigade in which it was announced, "These children will join Bhagat Singh Brigade. They have become free now and henceforth will work to free the country". It also asked the landlord not to harass their families and if this warning was not heeded, they would have to face dire consequences. The next day, Kamal Singh read this letter. He was dumbfounded and ran to inform his master. What difference could that make, because the bonded children had already been freed!

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Oblations in the Independence - Yagya

Lest the Death Sentence Gets Revoked

Bhagat Singh was sentenced to death by hanging in December 1930. He was accused of murdering a police official named Sanders and for throwing a bomb in the assembly. Bhagat Singh had committed both of these. They were committed as a part of the plan drawn up by the revolutionary group so as to enthuse the people to actively participate in the Independence Movement. When the investigation on these two cases began, Bhagat Singh made no attempt to go into a hiding and was easily apprehended by the British. The court case commenced. The police did not have clinching evidence against him. The government lawyer also could not present his case effectively, but everybody was well aware of the final judgment. Bhagat Singh was sentenced to death by hanging.

His revolutionary companions and leaders of the independence movement wanted the execution to be postponed. They believed that the people will react violently after the death sentence was implemented. They felt that it would be too difficult to manage the riots. Though Bhagat Singh was the member of the revolutionary group, he was also a companion in nationalist struggle for freedom launched by Congress. It was out of this brotherly feeling that all the big leaders wanted to protect the life of Bhagat Singh. In those days Pandit Motilal Nehru was in Shimla and was sick. He sent a message to appeal to the Privy Council in London to revoke the death sentence. Neither Bhagat Singh nor his companions gave a serious thought to this suggestion. They sent a reply thanking him and said that - probably the people of the country would get inspired to become free after Bhagat Singh was hanged and a wave for independence would surge forth.

On seeing the attempts being made to get him acquitted, Bhagat Singh was concerned and said to his associates, "Brothers! I am worried, lest the death sentence gets revoked!" Bhagat Singh's desire was fulfilled. All appeals to give amnesty to him were rejected and finally towards the end of 1930, he was immortalized as a martyr. His hanging truly breathed a new life in the freedom movement. There were series of strikes, demonstrations, protests and meetings everywhere. The name of Bhagat Singh was on the lips of every Indian – young and old. By the beginning of 1931, the public enthusiasm had risen to such a pitch that the revolutionary leaders felt that they could reach their goal within 4-6 months.

The atmosphere prevalent in the entire country had its effect in Aanwalkheda too. Shriram was leading the activities there. In his opinion, protests had limited significance. There was only a demonstration or two and meetings during the week. There was neither a police station in the village nor a government office. Once in a while a police officer or a superintendent or some Britisher would come there. After the hanging of Bhagat Singh, the frequency of these visits increased but not to a level that they were stationed there permanently. Shriram and his youth brigade went to nearby villages too. They used to go to Agra also once in 5-10 days. They used to participate in the activities related to independence struggle there and come back with the news and information regarding various parts of the country. Whenever there was a big demonstration or procession, Shriram made it a point to participate in it.

Seeing the rise in protests and processions against the British rule, the government resorted to suppression. There were curfews imposed every now and then during which more than 5 people were not supposed to gather at one place; people were not allowed to carry any kind of arms. Even then people did not stop. Whenever something out of the ordinary happened, curfew was imposed. This momentum had gathered in a period of two months. The seekers of independence through non-violence also believed that this change was predominantly because of the sacrifice of Bhagat Singh.

Young Shriram: A Revolutionary

Shriram reached Agra on 14th April, 1931. There was a meeting scheduled in Belanganj. It was known that the police will not allow the meeting to be held. In spite of that, the young men had decided to meet and accepted the organization of this meeting as a challenge. It was with this determination that Shriram reached Agra along with his companions Nathu, Gopi, Ram Saran, etc. The meeting was to take place at the Belanganj Chauraha (cross roads). Police force was stationed in that place from six in the morning. All those who passed by that road were searched. Not more than two persons were allowed to move together in that area.

Even though people knew that the meeting might not take place, they still were coming to the venue. Several people reached there in groups of three. All of them were caught by the police. Shriram and his friends decided to move separately and meet at the venue. It was challenging to move in a group and hence this decision was taken. Shriram went first. He saluted the police like a normal young farmer. That police searched him very nominally and let him pass. He was away from his companions by just 50-60 feet. After reaching the venue, these five boys took their positions in five different corners. The last one to reach was Govardhan and he made the sound like a cuckoo which was a signal for all of them to take their positions. A little later, he made the sound again. On hearing this, all five of them began to shout "Bharat Mata ki Jai"

Shouting the slogans, all five of them ran to the crossroads. They were shouting so loudly as though calling out for their other companions present nearby. The police were dumbfounded on seeing these boys shouting 'Bharat Mata ki Jai', 'Shahid Bhagat Singh Zindabad'. They began to chase them blowing their whistles. Some of them took position such that they could stop the running boys. Seeing one of the inspectors chasing him, Shriram said "Hello uncle" This sub-inspector was from Sahpau. On being greeted, the policeman recognized Shriram and asked him why he was there. Shriram said in a light tone, "I have come here to do what you have come to stop." Seeing an ongoing conversation between them, the police slackened. They just surrounded the boys and stood still.

Welcome to the Arrest

The uncle said, "You have to be arrested." This time Gopi replied, "When our martyrs have given their lives, will we not at least get arrested?" The police arrested all of them. This was the first time Shriram was arrested for his participation in the freedom struggle. They were kept in the Agra central jail. No court case was lodged against them. They were released after a few days with a warning. When they reached their village after being released from the jail, they were received like heroes who had come victorious after a war. Those people who had previously wanted their children to be away from freedom struggle had also come to receive Shriram's group. All the five boys were garlanded. Taiji applied *tilak* on the foreheads of all and blessed them.

Due to these activities of serving the motherland, Shriram's *sadhana* was affected a little. He could not complete his 6 hours of *jap* while in jail. It was possible to do *sadhana* during the day for sometime, but regularity in the *jap* was not possible. Interruptions were occurring for the past two years due to the offering of oblations in the *yagya* of independence struggle. There were times when he could do *jap* only for 4 hours and at other times he would get full 6 hours. Whenever he could not complete the requisite *jap*, he used to complete it during the subsequent days. Though there was no residual *jap*, he felt that several rules of *sadhana* were violated in the jail. He felt sad on this account. He did not share it with anyone. He planned for the upcoming activities while experiencing this anguish.

After extensive curfew orders, the local administration became strict and alert even towards ordinary demonstrations. Even if they saw a tricolor flying high in a house, they would get alerted. Volunteers didn't bother for the oppressive measures and decided to take out a flag procession. The place selected was the village of Jarkhi which was just a few kilometers away from Aanwalkheda. It was decided that they would not be contented with the participation of a minimal number of people. Instead there should be participation from at least 100 youth. They had decided to exhibit their intense love towards their National flag.

The preparations for the flag-procession began and the administration got information about it. It was gearing itself to stop it. There was no system of warning or counseling anyone. The only way of dealing with such a problem was to disrupt the crowd by force. The youth gearing up for the flag-procession were aware of this possibility. They were also adamant on disrupting the plans of the police and to continue with the procession. The district authorities also came to know that the same boys who were involved in breaking the curfew in Agra a few days back were playing the pivotal role in organizing this procession. Also, since one of sub-inspectors was known to the boys, they had not been dealt with strictly. Hence the enthusiasm of the boys had increased. This time, the police took extra care. An officer from Meerut was made in-charge of the task force.

The Flag-procession of Jarkhi

It was the 10th day of the bright fortnight of the month of *Jyeshtha*. Suddenly 25-35 boys approached from all directions and gathered at the *Chaupal* of Jharkhi. The police were also present there. All the boys were in village attire. They all looked simple and innocent. In the next half an hour, more youth joined and finally there was quite a good number of people. The policemen tried to explain, 'Boys! Why are you adamant? Nothing is going to happen by a procession or demonstration. One cannot get freedom just like that. Do something worthwhile, become capable, join government service."

A young boy replied, "Well, that is a thing of the future. First let our own government be formed." The same policeman said, "Instead of snapping back, it will be better if you go home and let us also go. Take rest." The same boy replied, "Uncle, then why don't you go. We will also complete our work and then leave. We are not resorting to any riot, isn't it?"

Shriram was listening to all this silently. He came forward and said, "We are not doing any revolt. Today is anyway the auspicious day of Ganga Dussera, when Mother Ganga descended onto the Earth from the hair-locks of Lord Shiva. It is a day of festivity. We will celebrate and then go off."

The police officer from Meerut said, "It is okay then. Don't make too much noise or take out the flag. Celebrate Ganga Dussera and go home."

The youth agreed. A wave of enthusiasm swept through the people gathered there. Immediately, they got divided into two lines as though everything was planned beforehand. Shriram was standing in the front. The procession was to move forward, when Shriram took out the flag folded inside his cap and a stick concealed in his shirt. Before batting an eyelid, the flag was ready. After this, he shouted the slogan "Bharat Mata ki Jai", 'Vande Mataram', 'May our beloved tricolor always fly high'. On hearing this, police stormed onto them. Blows were rained on all. Some of the boys ran away on seeing the police, while some others were dragged and taken into custody by the police.

He did not let the Flag Fall

Shriram stood there with the flag held firmly aloft. He became the target of blows from the police and fell down, but he didn't let the flag fall on the ground. Police wanted to snatch the flag from his hands but Shriram held it firmly in his grip. One of the policemen gave a blow on the hand which held the flag. When his hand began to shiver, Shriram held the flag with his teeth. The police beat his face but Shriram did not yield. He fell down unconscious but the flag was stuck in between his teeth. One of the soldiers plucked out the tricolor from the stick and it gave away. The place where Shriram fell was muddy and he quickly went down into the mud. The police dispersed the flag procession and went back.

The youth from the voluntary service group came after the police left. They pulled out Shriram from the mud and took him home. The doctor then poured a medicine into his mouth to bring him back into conscious state. The people who were around him were astounded to see a piece of the flag still lodged between his teeth. Since Shriram had firmly closed his jaws, this piece remained there. This incident clearly proved Shriram's faith, tenacity and willpower. The doctor also remarked that this youth was indeed *Matta* (intoxicated) for freedom. People who visited Shriram came out of the house saying –'*Kamal hai Mattaji*' (meaning – Mattaji! You are wonderful). Thus his nickname became a suffix to his real name.

It took time to regain health. He was not allowed to step out of the house that day. Taiji ensured that he did not even have to come out of his room. Lying down on the bed did not appeal to Shriram. He began to walk and move around. He even went out of his house. He had injured his head badly. So, he let the bandages stay there. Wherever the injuries were not bad, he took out the bandages and called his companions for discussion about the future course of action. By evening he had become normal by his own standards. But his friends and family did not consider him to be so. His companions had come and did speak to him for a while. After that, they advised him to take rest and went away.

He was to lie on the bed like a sick person. Shriram did not like this kind of loneliness. He was lost in thoughts like – "What is to be done tomorrow? What should be done if I was not allowed to go out tomorrow also? What will be the future form of the movement? What other activities should be carried out in the nearby places? The *sadhana* and *anushthan* have been irregular for the past two years. How can these be regularized and organized while participating in the freedom movement?" His mind was getting entangled in such questions. He was also answering these questions himself. In this process, he also began to realize the responsibilities that were to be encountered in the future.

Self-contemplation

There was an indication of a new arrival in the family. Shriram was to become a father. Taiji frequently started asking him to take care of zamindari, supervise the farms, etc. She would say, "The laborers and farmers do the work and there are other people to look after the management. It is true that nobody is unfaithful, but it is essential that one of the family members does some kind of supervision, even if it is just going and standing there once in a while"

Shriram realized that Taiji's words were right in their own way. But the next moment, a different inspiration would come and stop him from thinking like this. The thought would re-instate, 'The country comes first and hence his duty towards the country comes first'. Then a different thought came – 'The path shown by his guiding Guru five years back is the one that should be followed. Is it correct to leave that path and get involved in familial responsibilities?' Then another thought followed – 'But is the prescribed *sadhana* progressing well?' In this way, waves of thoughts rose and fell. He was lost in his world of thoughts while lying or seated on the cot. He did not realize when Taiji entered the room and stood near him.

She went away after he drank the medicine. The string of thoughts continued for a few moments more. The speed of those thoughts was so strong that it was not possible for Shriram to lie quietly on the cot. Shriram got up and sat on the cot. He continued to observe his thoughts. Then, there reached a state in which the thought forms vanished and so did the person who was getting submerged in them. His inner being was completely quiet and undisturbed. In that atmosphere, he began to hear divine music. It appeared as though several people were chanting the 'Guru Mantra' together. There were no words in that chanting but only a divine sound which was reverberating. Along with the waves of music, he realized that it was the time of sunrise. His room was being illuminated by the rays of the Sun. His mind and consciousness were filled with that light. It was as though his entire being was filled with light.

Guidance by *Gurusatta*

In that engrossed state, he saw his guiding light standing in front of him with his hand held in *Abhay Mudra* (posture of promising protection). Gurudev did not utter anything through his mouth. It was as though his presence itself was giving out a message. That message had assurance and also the guidance for the coming days. There was nobody else in the room. Gurudev said – "Your agony is that *sadhana* is not progressing properly? Don't worry. It is important to get freedom for the land where you have to sow the seeds of *sadhana*. Hence struggle for national freedom is also a part of your *sadhana*. Don't feel guilty about the violations that have happened. Such disturbances can come in the future too. That is in a way necessary. Whatever remains pending in *jap* and *dhyan* can be completed at a later time. But now, let the land of *rishis* get its independence. Participate in that freedom struggle. It is just a matter of few years."

This assurance of his Gurudev echoed in his ears. The echo of the words assuaged each and every atom of his body. After that, everything returned to normalcy. There were no more disturbing or confusing thoughts in his mind. Probably, his guilt that the responsibility given by Gurudev was not being discharged properly, that there were disturbances in his *sadhana* due to freedom movement etc. was removed. Shriram lied down peacefully and fell asleep.

He woke up at three in the morning. Just like any other day, he began to prepare for his bath followed by meditation. Taiji had a feeling that her beloved son would not take rest like a sick or injured person. That is why she came out the moment Shriram woke up. She began to arrange for his bath and to ensure that his wound did not get wet. She kept standing outside till Shriram got ready and entered his *puja* room. The editor of 'Sainik' Sri Krishnadutt Paliwal heard about the police attack on the youth who took out the flag-procession. He came to Aanwalkheda the very next day. He was thinking that Shriram might still be confined to bed. To his surprise, he saw Shriram working actively and discussing with his group of volunteers. The arrival of Paliwalji was unexpected. He had not sent any message about his coming. Seeing him arrive suddenly left Shriram and his companions in wonder and happiness. After the initial pleasantries were exchanged, Paliwalji heard the entire sequence of events in great detail. He praised the courage shown by the boys.

Struggle Against the *Jagirdar*

Since Paliwalji had come, he presided over the meeting as the chief guest. While addressing the youth, he mentioned the atrocities done by *jagirdar* Suraj Prakash Singh. That village, Jarar, had become the center for *satyagrihi* activities. Suraj Prakash was a big sycophant of the British. In those days, all the landlords vied with each other to please the British government. Suraj Prakash was resorting to new machinations to suppress the activities of *satyagrahis* in the village. His most favorite method was to have the revolutionaries beaten black and blue by his ruffians. Paliwalji said that a *satyagrahi* of that village named Srichand Donoriya was waylaid by Suraj Prakash's ruffians at the outskirts of the village and was beaten up badly a few days ago. Donoriya had fallen down unconscious. Even today, he is lying unconscious in a hospital in Agra

Shriram's group decided in the meeting that they would go to Agra and enquire about the well-being of Donoriya. Seeing the condition that Shriram was in, his companions asked him to stay back but Shriram did not agree to it. There ensued an argument between Shriram and his friends. Paliwalji intervened and said that once the bandage of Shriram's head was removed, they could visit Donoriya. He also said that there were other volunteers who were taking care of him in Agra. Everyone agreed to this plan.

It was as though Shriram was waiting for his bandage to be removed. Once he recovered a little, Shriram and three other volunteers went to visit Donoriya. On reaching Agra, they found that his family had taken him back to Jarar so that he could be treated with Ayurveda medicines. The village of Jarar was about 40 kms from Agra.

Donoriya was lying unconscious in the village. After Shriram enquired about his condition, and found out information about how the Ayurvedic treatment would be administered, he went to Vaidyaji (ayurvedic doctor) and asked, "Tell me clearly the status of Donoriya's physical condition. I will treat him through spiritual means too." Vaidyaji agreed to tell about the patient's condition provided Shriram did not divulge the facts to Donoriya's family. According to him, Donoriya's life was in grave danger. The vital spots in the brain had been injured severely. Even the doctors in Agra had felt that there was no hope and hence were treating him half-heartedly. That was the reason why they allowed him to be shifted to Jarar on his family's request.

Spiritual Treatment

Donoriya was his *gotra* name. Hence his entire family was called with that surname. But Shrichand was famous amongst his friends and companions with that surname only. After talking to Vaidyaji, Shriram went back to Donoriya and sat at the head of the bedstead. He closed his eyes and meditated for some time. After 10-15 minutes, he got up and sat near his knees facing Donoriya. He gazed at his companion without batting his eyelids. He sat there in that position for 20-25 minutes gazing at him lovingly. It was evening and nobody dared to disturb Shriram from his meditative state. Gopi felt that if Shriram was not reminded, then it would be difficult to return to Aanwalkheda late in the night. He went near Shriram and muttered something in his ears. It had no effect on Shriram who continued to sit there undisturbed.

Shriram got up 15-20 minutes later. He paid his respects to Donoriya's parents and promised to pay another visit during the following week and left the place. It was already quite dark and they began to sing patriotic songs and discussed about various things during their walk back in the moonlit night to Aanwalkheda. One of the topics that were discussed was regarding the atrocities of Suraj Praksh. They also thought of some methods by which he could be confronted. One of the methods was similar to what they had used before to get released the boys kept as slaves by Seth Biradichand. The advantage there was that they did not have to face any ruffians sporting sticks and clubs in the farm. Hence this plan worked well for them. But in the case of Suraj Prakash, there were too many ruffians to be encountered. It was difficult for the volunteers to fight with them. Hence it was decided that they would come up with some other plan in a couple of days. They also discussed about various programs that should be conducted to give momentum to the freedom struggle.

Overcoming Destiny

Shriram had received the assurance from his guiding light that he need not feel restless or guilty when his stipulated *japa* could not be completed. He was advised to consider his actions as *ahutis* (oblations) in the *yagya* of struggle for independence and that they were also a form of *anushthan*. In spite of this, Shriram had made it a point to take as much time out as possible to do his *sandhyavandan* and the requisite *japa*. There were times when this could not be achieved. For example, when he was returning from Jarar, he could not complete his evening *jap*. So, he spent extra time on the next morning to complete the backlog. It was eight O'clock when he completed the *jap* and moved to the ritual of *nivedan* (offering) when he offered the fruits of the *japa* to the Lord with the following mantra:

Iti sandhyopasanakhyena karmanaam sri parameswarah preeyataam na mama

Just as he completed the above mantra, there arose a thought in his inner being. It was as though his inner consciousness was speaking: "If *japa* and penance are an offering to the Lord, then why should they be used to reduce one's *prarabdha* (destiny)?"

The question was related to the prayer done when seated near Donoriya. The next instant, answer came that it was not targeted to neutralize the effects of *prarabdha* but for the welfare of the people fighting for Indian Independence. His former inner argument still persisted - that whatever be the case, *sadhana* should not be used for material benefits; this amounts to interference in the law of Karma created by the Lord. His former argument began to prevail. When the riddle got entangled, he began to look at the picture of Mother Gayatri that was established there. He concentrated on the picture for a few minutes. He could see a smile playing on Her lips and the next moment felt that the lips moved. There was an indistinct sound coming from Her, but he could clearly hear what was being conveyed. The message received was that the *sadhana* of a *sadhak* is for the purpose of overcoming *prarabdha*. Ultimately, everyone has to merge into the Supreme Spirit. If that was to happen as a natural process, then nobody needs to do *sadhana*. But we have to win over the Nature; overcome destiny; have to cut the ropes of bondage tied by Nature. Shriram got his answer.

After *nivedan*, Shriram repeated his prayer and specifically prayed for Donoriya's life and strength. After the prayer he felt assured that it was heard. After 3-4 days, Shriram thought of visiting Jarar and enquiring about Donoriya's well-being. During this meeting it was also proposed to discuss the strategy to oust Suraj Prakash. According to their strategy, Donoriya had to play a leading role. When a person from the same village confronted him, there were more chances of success.

The day they went to meet Donoriya, his condition far from normal; although there was improvement from his previous condition and he had regained consciousness. He was sleeping when they went to his house. They enquired about his well-being from the family members and proceeded to talk to Vaidyaji. He told - 'God has showered His grace; else there is little that can be hoped when a person is unconscious for so many days'.

When asked, 'Donoriyaji has received a serious head injury. How long will it take for recovery?' Vaidyaji replied, 'It might take 8-10 days. Earlier there was no hope, but now since he has regained consciousness, I am able to make this guess.'

After spending some time with Vaidyaji, Shriram went back to his revolutionary companion. He had woken up. After regaining consciousness, he experienced several spells of sleep. He recognized Shriram immediately. He tried to sit up in a gesture of respect. Shriram asked him to lie down and said, "Mother India needs you. It is her blessings with which you are regaining your life and health."

On hearing this, Donoriyaji smiled. He said, 'Hope I will be able to walk and move around quickly, so that an end can be put to this atrocious rule.' He was referring to the atrocities of Suraj Prakash. They talked for a long time. They discussed about the status of revolutionary movement in other regions. In the course of the talk, the topic of defeating the Jagirdar of Jarar also came up. Shriram suggested 'After ten – twelve days, when he has recovered, he should sit in front of Suraj Prakash's house. Other people should also accompany and sit with him. Then they should explain to all the passersby about his atrocities.'

Donoriya showed great enthusiasm and asked, "Why should we wait for ten – twelve days? Why not to go now?" On hearing this Gopinath said, "If your health does not deteriorate, we can even go now. We will make more impact in this injured state of yours." Though everyone liked Gopinath's idea, it was felt necessary to wait for at least three – four days. It was anyway risky to sit in front of the mansion during the hot summer of May -June. They anyway needed three – four days to prepare for the strike.

It took about three days to pass on this news to active workers and to prepare posters. Shriram took a lead role in this activity. He wrote in bold letters about the atrocities of Suraj Prakash. He explained that the motive of the *dharna* was to force the Jagirdar to put an end to his coercive rule. About twenty five feet from his mansion, a raised platform was constructed. On the day the *dharna* was to begin, Srikrishna Dutt Paliwal was called from Agra. Other leaders also accompanied Paliwalji. Suraj Prakash was disturbed with their presence. He got an impression that if he tried to disrupt the *dharna* using some ruffians, then the situation could become more explosive; in the presence of Paliwalji and other local leaders, any kind of coercion might prove to be damaging

Shriram left after the indefinite *dharna* began. He kept coming every 2-3 days to find out about the status. The happenings in front of Suraj Prakash's house were being published in the newspapers. The number of people visiting the place of *dharna* increased. Everybody knew about Suraj Prakash's tyranny, but nobody used to openly discuss about it. The proceedings and conversations in Donoriya's tent reached the ears of the tyrant through his messengers. Each and every new message used to prick his inflated ego.

Within ten – twelve days, a stage was reached in which the Jagirdar began a dialogue with Shriram. He did not himself come forward, but instead sent a middleman. Shriram sent a reply asking him to go to Donoriya himself and give an assuring answer to him after listening to him attentively. Suraj Prakash saw a reflection of his defeat in this situation. But he was also afraid of a revolt against him in the village. The messages from his spies indicated that the minds of the people were highly surcharged.

Jagirdar Learnt his Lesson

He sought advice from his well-wishers in the administration. They advised him that it would be wise to make a truce with Donoriya and his associates. The responsibility of outlining the program of meeting was given to Shriram. He congratulated Donoriya on his victory. A small formal program was organized in which Suraj Prakash offered Donoriya a glass of *lassi* and called him his son. Suraj Prakash also told that the doors of his mansion were always open to Donoriya for any kind of help.

Suraj prakash however did not seek an apology for what gad happened in the past. This was not expected also. His offer to cooperate itself was a token of apology. After this incident, the Jagirdar almost stopped troubling the people. The nuisance caused by the antisocial elements was also controlled to a large extent. After the truce between Suraj Prakash and Donoriya, someone suggested that they celebrate the victory. Shriram did not agree to this. He felt that the ego of Suraj Prakash would be hurt by such a show. Hence the idea was dropped. The intent was not to defeat someone, but to establish an atmosphere of peace and justice. That had been achieved.

The effects of non-cooperation movement that began the previous year were still felt. After the signing of 'Gandhi-Irwin Pact' in March 1931, the movement was adjourned. The government also stopped its oppressive methods and took to the path of solving the issues through discussions. All oppressive laws were revoked. Except for those who were arrested for violence and other crimes, all the political prisoners were freed. In this way the heat of the movement cooled down, but the national consciousness that was aroused by this movement went on intensifying.

When the atmosphere of enthusiasm prevailed, 'Sainik' newspaper was very popular. It was the primary medium for transmitting the news about the movement. After the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, the national fervor did not evaporate altogether, but the intensity had definitely decreased. With this the newspaper also suffered a decline in readership. Some volunteers began to quit the paper lest the fury of the government fell on them. This fear was baseless, but three – four people left the newspaper. Since there was not much of scintillating news, the number of subscribers also decreased. Paliwalji requested Shriram to help if possible. Shriram unconditionally agreed to Paliwalji's request. He was placed in the editorial department. In those days, it was not customary to issue appointment letter with a definite salary. People used to enter an organization like a guest or as a family member. Shriram also became a member of 'Sainik' family.

Initially, it was planned that he would travel daily from Aanwalkheda to Agra. This routine was also followed for some time. But later on, it became essential to shift to Agra. Taiji was not giving permission for that. Hence his travel to Agra was suspended for a while and he started writing the articles and regular features from Aanwalkheda itself. He would deliver his work at Agra every three – four days. He would then proof-read the articles given earlier and return home the same evening. Taiji used to observe these trips and his pre-occupation in the activities of freedom struggle. He would go to Agra twice a week and sometimes even more frequently. Seeing all this, Taiji called Shriram to her and asked in an affectionate tone, "You have become very weak. Looks like you are not getting the food of your choice."

Shriram replied, "Nothing like that. I eat full and nourishing diets and work all day. How could have I worked so much if I was weak?" Taiji paid no heed to his reply. It was as though she had already made up her mind. Ignoring Shriram's clarification, she said, "You must be getting strained by traveling to Agra frequently. I will manage my feelings. You stay with Paliwalji at Agra."

The Camp Shifted to Agra

Shriram agreed to it. Taiji wiped her tears and said, "I had seen Paliwalji when he visited us. He seems to be a nice gentleman. Help him. Come here for a day every week." After this conversation, she asked the Munshi (clerk) of the Haveli to take care of arrangements in Agra. There was no need for any arrangements because Paliwalji had proposed that he stay at his house itself. But Taiji felt that it might be better to stay on one's own.

After shifting to Agra, Shriram handed over the responsibility of overseeing the nationalist movement activities in Aanwalkheda to Gopinath. It was anyway decided that he would visit his home once a week. If there arose any need for discussion, they could do so in the office of 'Sainik' or when he visited his home. Shriram's pen now took onto the road of journalism. He was completely absorbed in reading and writing. In those days, the office was not merely an office of a newspaper but a place of refuge for many freedom fighters, where discussions on several topics were held and strategies were made. If these activities continued till late in the night, people used to sleep in the office premises itself.

As an Editor

Paliwalji used to be out of station in connection with the matters of the freedom struggle and other engagements. After Shriram had moved to Agra, Paliwalji felt slightly relieved. The very first day after Shriram moved in full-time, he prepared two and a half pages on his own. The entire issue consisted of four pages. In addition to his first day's record performance and also based on other things that Shriram had done ealier, Paliwalji had a very good impression of him.

More than what was published in 'Sainik'; the government was worried about the revolutionaries who found refuge in its office. To get rid of this worry, the government kept planning on how they could close 'Sainik'. When the speed of the movement slowed a little, government found an opportunity to implement their plans. They arrested two journalists on the charge of possessing weapons. They threatened six –

seven employees and stopped them from working at 'Sainik' office. With this sizeable reduction in staff, there were problems in releasing a new issue of the paper on time. Paliwalji was out on some organizational work and there was not enough time to send him a message. Even if a message was sent to him, it would take so much time for him to come that the time of releasing the new issue would have long gone past. The remaining employees in the office were pondering over this intractable challenge.

Shriram offered to himself take over the entire work of collecting the news, writing them, composing them and then proof-reading the same. His fellow employees continued lamenting that it was not feasible to publish the paper on time. Such a negative placed hurdles on whatever work could be accomplished with a reduced workforce. Shriram advised that it was better to keep quiet than expressing such futile worries; and if they were truly worried, then it was best that they helped him, wherever possible.

Two of his colleagues understood their mistake and began to work earnestly. They had experience in handling the machines. Hence a good team of three people was formed and that day the newspaper got ready and was sent to the public on time. Those who had conspired to close 'Sainik' and were confident that the next issue would not see the light of the day were dumbfounded. A team of three had succeeded in bringing out the new issue of the paper. Not a single line or the quality of printing showed that there was some problem in the running of the paper.

The next day's newspaper was also published in the same manner. In the first page, Shriram had written a request in which he described the unprecedented crisis that had struck the 'Sainik' in the past two days. He described the entire episode as an act of oppression by the authorities and also appreciated the extra-ordinary efforts of the courageous employees. This message had its effect and people started coming to the 'Sainik' office from the afternoon of the very same day and offered themselves as volunteers to help. They were purely readers and had no experience in journalism or in publishing a paper. This public enthusiasm and response instilled new zeal in the office of 'Sainik'. The two employees who had quit work the previous day also returned and the next day, situation was normal.

'Sainik' Found its Commander

Paliwalji returned on the third day. He had received the information about the crisis that had overtaken the 'Sainik' and was worried. But when he entered the office, he saw that everything was normal. His people then apprised him of the seriousness of the trouble and the challenge that 'Sainik' had faced. He was overcome by emotion on seeing what was printed on the first page of 'Sainik'. Overwhelmed by Shriram's presence of mind and dedication, Paliwalji hugged Shriram. He was choked with happiness and could not speak. He patted Shriram's back and said: "'Sainik' has found its *Senapati* (commander)" Shriram was witnessing all this quietly.

Paliwalji began to give new shape to the paper's organization. The arrangement that had evolved over the past 3 days did not need much change. Paliwalji reduced Shriram's responsibilities and chose new companions. Among the old employees many had stopped coming completely. Only two of them were coming. They were given the responsibilities of production and distribution. Shriram was mainly left with editing work. He did not have any specific experience of running a newspaper. Paliwalji decided to give more time for the newspaper and that he would not go out until he had trained them in the nuances of publishing a newspaper. In the course of the talk, he told Shriram – 'I have found my right-hand. Promise me that you will always stay in the family of 'Sainik' and will not go anywhere.'

Not a Promise but a Resolve

Shriram replied immediately, 'Nothing can be said about how the circumstances will push me and in which direction. Hence I cannot give you my word. But you will always find me as your associate and well-wisher.' Hearing this Paliwalji understood that his expectation was primarily sentimental and hence found whatever Shriram said to be appropriate.

The heat of the freedom movement had abated only for a short time. Situation appeared peaceful for a few months. Gandhiji was invited as the sole representative of the Congress to the Second Round Table Conference to be held in London. The first conference was held in November 1930. There was no representative from the Congress in that meet. Even then, the government of Britain had accepted to hand over the legislative powers to the local elected bodies at the state and central levels. Congress did not show special enthusiasm for this gesture. The second conference was to be held from September to December of 1931. People discussed about the possibilities of success or failure because of Mahatma Gandhi's presence. As the dates of the conference approached, curiosity levels in people rose.

Even before Gandhiji left, the question of religion-based reservations to elected bodies had risen. The demand was coming from the Muslims. The British government fanned the fires on the issue. Scholars who have done research in the history believe that the seeds for the partition of India were sown with this proposal of proportional representation on the basis of religion, in 1931. On basis of religion, not only Muslims but Sikhs, Christians, Jains, and other communal groups began to demand that they too be given such representation.

Right from accepting the invitation to the round table conference till its completion, Shriram critically commented on the conference in 'Sainik'. Letters, analysis, inspiring songs and commentaries written under the names of 'Matt', 'Shriram', 'Shriram Sharma' and others had made the newspaper popular and favorite to many people. The tone of his writing was primarily nationalistic. He used to proclaim with emphasis -- "All those living in India are primarily Indians and something else later. People with diverse tastes and nature have stayed in this country. Unity has prevailed amidst this diversity and people have lived in harmony. It is this understanding and love that has been the basis for the unity of the nation." His letters and articles gave several references from the history and ancient scriptures. In a matter of 7-8 weeks, he had made a fan-following from amongst the readers of 'Sainik'.

First Speech

As was feared, the moment Mahatma Gandhi left for London, the wheel of oppression caught pace in India. Shriram usually wore *dhoti kurta*. After joining Sainik, he began to wear shorts and shirt too. This dress was worn during work or while participating in demonstrations or *satyagraha*. During processions, he used to hold a small stick also in his hands. After conducting the flag procession in Jharkhi, he had taken to the stick as Krishna had taken to the flute. He used to carry a shoulder bag in which he kept a couple of books, a handkerchief, a towel etc. The day he received the news that Gandhiji had rejected the proposal made in the Second Round Table Conference, Shriram donned the role of a whole-time *satyagrahi* and stepped out of the office of 'Sainik'.

He wrote in bold letters '*Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai*' (Victory to Mahatma Gandhi) on a paper and pasted it on a wall outside the office. People walking on that path stopped to read the poster. Once 8-10 people had gathered, Shriram began to deliver a short speech. In the speech, he gave the message of Mahatma Gandhi's return to India and the aspect of national unity embedded in it. The place where people had gathered and were listening formed part of the office premises of 'Sainik'. There was no formal arrangement for a meeting. He had just come out and had felt enthused to speak on seeing the people who had stopped to read the poster. This was the first public speech given by Shriram. Before this, he only spoke during discussions and meetings where the nature of talk was like an informal conversation in which others also participated.

When Paliwalji came to know of this, he congratulated Shriram and said, "This is a new chapter in your public life. The day this has happened is also so apt, since it is the day when Gandhiji has revealed the evil designs of British government and is returning home." On this victorious day, a soldier (Shriram) of Gandhiji's army had added a new feather to his personality. At the time when Shriram was giving his first speech outside the office of 'Sainik', Gandhiji was addressing a huge gathering of people in Mumbai. The very fact that a person wearing a half-dhoti went to London and had left indelible imprint of his charisma there had made the people thrilled. In the meeting Gandhiji stressed the need to maintain the momentum of the struggle for freedom unabated.

Three days later, on 1st January 1932, a meeting of the Congress Working Committee was held in which it was decided to start the non-cooperation movement again. It was resolved to boycott foreign goods, too. When people heard that the freedom struggle would be revived with added vigor, they were excited. The reaction that this announcement created made one feel as though people had always been waiting for it and knew what steps were to be taken immediately after the announcement.

British government also had an inkling of what was going to come. With the return of Gandhiji, the government began to arrest anyone who appeared to have even remotely associated himself with revolutionary activities. Three days after the announcement of non-cooperation movement, Gandhiji was also arrested. Congress was proclaimed to be an illegal body. The noose tightened over all the volunteers and newspapers working for the Congress. Publication of all the newspapers that supported the national struggle was stopped. The office of 'Sainik' in Agra was also closed. The people who worked in it went into hiding.

Refuge in Suraj Prakash's House

Due to the swift and stringent action taken by British Government in the first week of January, Shriram too left the office of 'Sainik'. He carried a sheaf of papers along with him. He wanted to gather the clothes and other articles he had, but felt that it would be more useful to carry the paper used for printing news instead. They would come handy to write news and paste it on doors and walls. Shriram did not go to Aanwalkheda from Agra, as he suspected that police would already be lying in wait for him there. He went straight to Jarar.

Donoriya's house was also not safe. Seeing his involvement in revolutionary activities, there was a fear of police coming there. He went to Suraj Prakash's house and asked him to arrange for his stay in one of his gardens for few days.

Suraj Prakash was the Jagirdar of the area. Seeking refuge with him was a risky proposal. But Suraj Prakash remembered the days in which Shriram had helped him emerge respectfully out of the *Dharna* that Donoriya had staged. Speeches of the leaders of the national movement echoed in his ears. The threats that came from the District Collector of Agra, Mr Williams every now and then had also opened his eyes. Suraj Prakash had begun to think: 'Of what use is supporting the British? They are here today but will not be there tomorrow. The local people will always be here and be of help at all times.' Shriram had sensed this change in attitude in Suraj Prakash and hence approached him to arrange for his stay for few days. Everything was arranged and a house that was two kilometers away was identified for the purpose.

Publishing Wall-version of 'Sainik'

Shriram called Donoriya and his other revolutionary friends to his place. Since the 'Sainik' office had been closed, publishing the newspaper was not possible. They began to write on the papers using a reed-stalk. The first copy was made ready by Shriram. Others made multiple copies of that. When twenty to twenty five copies got ready, they made plans to paste them on the walls in various areas of Agra. This involved a lot of physical exertion and risk. It was not possible to publish a new issue daily. The intention was to keep the presence of 'Sainik' alive. Shriram reached Agra with his friends and pasted the wall-version of Sainik in several chosen places. After that he felt it was better to stay in Agra than return to Suraj Prakash's house. The basic requirement was to hide himself, and hence there was no need to stay several miles away for that purpose, when he could easily stay incognito in Agra itself.

The government was suppressing the freedom struggle ruthlessly. Revolutionaries who were living a public life were arrested in the first round itself. All those who were involved in background tasks were being searched with hawk's eye. In the first issue of 'Sainik' itself, he had written that the British were ruthless cheats; and he invited people to oust them. The process of collecting news had not developed then. The reporters used to travel here and there for collecting regional news. For any news outside the town, they had to rely on radio, telegram and telephone, all of which were controlled by the government. It was next to impossible to receive any correct news. Those who had yielded to the British were publishing news in favor of government and were announcing that there was peace everywhere. They focused on publishing things that worried the people.

The Effigy of the Queen was Burnt

In the second handwritten issue of 'Sainik', a message was published that the effigy of the Queen would be burnt on 10th January at 10 in the morning at the banks of river Yamuna. This issue was pasted on the wall opposite the house of Collector. The administration was alerted. It planned to disrupt this activity and arrest all those involved in it. Banks of Yamuna covers a huge expanse of area and surrounds Agra for about 10 kilometers. The message did not speak of the particular place where it would be done and hence police kept an eye on each and every possible venue.

The wall-version of 'Sainik' was pasted at fifteen –twenty places only, but the message published in it reached thousands of people by word of mouth. People were wondering about the exact venue for burning the effigy. The day of 10th January arrived. The police were extremely alert. The volunteers working for 'Sainik' hoodwinked the police who kept watch on the banks of the Yamuna. A youth came and reported to the police that people had gathered in large numbers near the Taj Mahal; probably the effigy would be burnt there. The police force ran to that place. From a distance they saw that a group of youth was standing in a circle. There was something burning and flames were rising to the sky. Youth were crying 'The queen is no more; her rule is also no more'. There were shouts of '*Bharat Mata ki Jai*' and '*Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai*'. The police approached the group stealthily. But the youth were aware and cautious. One of them saw the police and alerted the others. All of them vanished in a matter of seconds. The speed at which the vanishing act was performed left the police spellbound. There was no chance for the police to follow them. Hence they tried to put down the flames but it was of no avail as the effigy had been completely burnt to ashes. Half-burnt pieces of the planks on which '*Bharat Mata ki Jai*' and '*British Raj Murdabad*' were written were strewn all over the place.

The call of Pandit Motilal Nehru had reached the people. It was an appeal for rejecting anything that was foreign, to burn all foreign goods, clothes and to discourage those who drank alcohol. These messages were published in the wall version of 'Sainik'.

The publicity work was anyway in progress in the villages. The work of Swaraj Panchayats had also commenced there. The news of dissolving the old Panchayats and the formation of new Panchayats with people working for the national movement was also published in the new

'Sainik'. The news about creating parallel governance at the district level was also being emphasized in the paper. A new issue of 'Sainik' was being released every five – six days. Police and the detective department were tired of searching the source of this newspaper. They wanted to search the persons who prepared it. Their main suspects were the ex-employees of 'Sainik' and Shriram's name was at the top of the list. But they could not trace him.

Hoodwinking the Police and the Arrest

There is a village named Kiravali in the Agra Mandal. It had become a center for the revolutionaries. There was constant flow of freedom fighters in that village. Meetings were held and strategies made for expanding the movement in the nearby villages. When police got scent of this place, they wanted to spread a net for catching all the freedom fighters at one go. The plan was to arrest them all when a meeting was in progress. Shriram got to know of this plan of the police. He resolved to disrupt their plan. About 60 freedom fighters were to gather on 16th March. Two vehicles of policemen started from Agra to catch them.

They heard voices of youth five kilometers before Kiravali itself and the police vehicles stopped there. It appeared as though an issue was being argued about. They could not hear clearly because of the noise of the passing traffic. The head of the police force, Janak Singh ordered the vehicles to stop and tried to make out the voices. They understood that the topic of discussion was to to cut off the telephone lines of the district office, police station and the court and then attack those places.

Janak Singh immediately cordoned off the place with the police force and slowly tightened the noose. When they reached close, they saw that a young boy was reading out the conversations from a piece of paper and other boys were imitating him. It looked to be a rehearsal of some drama. Janak Singh shouted at the boys and asked them, 'What kind of drama are you making? You are teaching about conspiring against the government?' The boy who was holding the paper in his hands replied, "No Sir, you have not seen the end of the drama. All the freedom fighters are beaten and defeated at the end. The families of those people face adversity. We are writing this drama so as to encourage people to cooperate with the government."

Drama with the Police

Fifteen to twenty minutes were spent in cordoning off the place and in the conversation with the boys. When the policemen came back, they saw that the tyres of their vehicles had been punctured. Someone had pushed nails into all the tyres. Janak Singh understood the whole story and 'the drama within the drama'. When he ran to catch the boys who were rehearsing the lines, he saw that they had already vanished. Shriram had chalked out the entire plan to hoodwink the police and take the *swarajis* to safety. He had punctured the police vehicles with his own hands. To learn this art of puncturing, he had sought the help of a mechanic.

Police had grown tired of searching for Shriram. As a last resort, they got ready to nab him in Aanwalkheda. Some messenger had told them that Shriram visited his mother once a week on Sundays. Police started watching his house from Thursday itself. Several police men in plain clothes were taking turns to watch his house. They could not notice any special movements in the house. They tried to find if Shriram visited home every Sunday or on alternate Sundays, but they could not get any clear answers. From his mansion, someone had sent a message to Shriram in Agra that the police were watching the house and were waiting for him.

In the Jail

Shriram cancelled his plans to visit his home on that Sunday. He sent a message to Taiji through the same messenger that he would come home on the following Wednesday. The police in Aanwalkheda were left waiting for Shriram. At the same time, they found posters with '*Bharat mata ki Jai*', '*Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai*', 'Freedom is our Birthright and we will achieve it' on the walls of Agra. The way the sentences were written resembled the writings of 'Sainik' wall posters.

On 5th April, 1932 Shriram was suddenly caught. He had just concluded his morning *upasana* when he heard a knock at the door. When he opened the door, he saw four – five policemen standing there. There was an old colleague named Gangadeen who had come to recognize Shriram. This man had disclosed the house of Shriram to the police out of greed for a reward. Arrest of Shriram was a big achievement for the police. Standing at the door of his house, the policeman said, 'You have been playing smart all these days, what have you to say now?' Shriram replied – 'This is the play of the Lord. Probably, he wants me to take rest for a while.' After keeping him in custody for one-and-a-half months, he was sentenced to jail for six months and a penalty of twenty five rupees.

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Blessing and Assurance

Shriram Becomes Father

It was the afternoon of a day in August 1932 when Gopinath from Anwalkheda had come to Agra Central Jail to meet his friend Shriram and was sitting in a waiting room of the jail. People were taking turns to come and meet their friends and relatives in that room. Political prisoners had the freedom to meet visitors outside their cells. Gopinath's name was announced by police attendant and he said – 'Your relative Shriram is waiting in room number twenty three. Complete your meeting in ten minutes. Note that you will not get more time than this.'

In room number twenty three Gopinath saw Shriram seated along with some other political detenus. He was busy talking to them and it did not appear as though he was waiting for Gopinath. The moment he heard footsteps, Shriram got up and hugged his friend. Gopinath was overcome with emotions and could not speak when he saw Shriram dressed as a prisoner. His eyes were filled with tears and before he could gather himself, Shriram asked several questions about the welfare of his friends and family in the village. Gopi could not say anything more than 'all is well'. After a while, when he was able to compose himself, he said – 'Brother, I have some good news for you.' Shriram looked at Gopi and was waiting for him to complete the sentence. Gopi said, 'I have become an uncle. Bhabhiji (Shriram's wife) and nephew are doing well. Taiji has asked you to suggest a name for the baby.'

Shriram was happy to hear the news. He was elated to hear the news that he had become a father, but instead of expressing his joy, he chose to keep quiet. He closed his eyes and silently recited Gayatri Mantra. He opened his eyes and said 'OM' and again assumed silence as though he was repeating the Gayatri mantra one more time. After a few moments, Shriram said, 'Give him the name OM! Omprakash.' After having chosen the name, Shriram, with the permission of the police attendant, got some jaggery and distributed it to all those sitting near him including Gopi. Thus was celebrated the birth of his son.

He continued to talk of several things with Gopi. The attendant came and announced that the visiting time was over. Gopinath got up looking as though he was trying to gather his belongings although he hadn't any luggage. He somehow had the feeling that he had not spent enough time talking to his friend. The surge of emotions was so strong that he did not want to get up and leave. It was as though he wanted to linger on for some time more under the pretext of gathering his belongings. But he could not do it for long. Shriram assured him and said, 'I will come out soon. It is just a matter of one-and-a-half to two months. After that, we will all work as before and shout the slogans of 'Victory to Mother India.' Saying that he will try again next week, Gopinath got up. He had only eaten a very small portion of the jaggery that Shriram gave. He had saved the rest of it in his palm and said, 'All of us will share and eat this in Anwalkheda.' By the time he completed this sentence, his eyes were filled with tears. Shriram's eyes also were wet and he tried hard to evade looking into Gopinath's eyes. He hugged Gopi and patted his back. Then Shriram walked back into his cell and Gopi also went his way.

Home, When Shriram was in Jail

There were twelve other people in the Central Jail. They were either his associates or well-wishers. Among the people in the room, two were close to him. Some visitors had come to meet them, too. After Gopinath left, Shriram began to think about his home. He realized that conditions at his home had become tense and worrisome due to his participation in the freedom struggle. His home was a spacious mansion with farms, servants etc. but all these had to be managed by Taiji single-handedly. In the joint family, there were other brothers and relatives, but no one was capable of shouldering any responsibility. Shriram was the light of the family and he carried lot of responsibility. But much of his time was spent in the freedom struggle, *sadhana* and *swadhyay*. He hardly had any time left for familial responsibilities. When he was sentenced to jail for six months, it had a very bad effect in the village. People began to say, 'We had tried to caution him earlier itself. Who has been able to win against the British Raj? Even the Sun does not dare to set under their rule. How can anyone pull the curtains of their rule? Mattji was mad with patriotic fervor. When he comes after serving the sentence, he will himself mend his ways.'

Durga Shankar, an uncle in relationm, used to constantly tease Taiji on his account. He would say, "Now, Shriram will learn some more skills because of which there will be no need to earn to maintain the family.' For the first time, Taiji did not understand his taunt and asked what was meant by it.

Uncle said, 'I am referring to things like stealing, robbing, cheating etc.' Taiji kept a sullen face after hearing this and kept quiet. She was hurt but she consoled herself by the thought that life of her son was not confined to earning means of livelihood for his family, like others and that he was working for the entire nation.

As she was thinking thus, her train of thoughts was interrupted with the fact that her son was in jail. It was not a good thing to go to jail. It spoils the reputation of one's family. The jail is definitely not for 'noble' people. Her inner lament was countered by another set of thoughts – 'Lord Krishna was born in the jail. Who has defamed him because of that? Vasudev and Devaki were confined to jail. The *asuras* used to capture and torture many noble souls. Even Gandhiji has been to jail several times.' With such musings, she fell asleep. After this incident, his uncle threw tantrums several times but Taiji was not at all affected by them. She got busy in managing both house and agriculture farms in Shriram's absence.

We will be Careful from now Onwards

After this spell in jail because of participation in freedom struggle, behavior of Shriram's relatives changed considerably. He came to know this by interacting with those who visited him in the jail. It was Shriram's friends and co-workers who primarily came to visit him in the jail. His family members and relatives visited him rarely. His Mama (maternal uncle) had come twice and he suggested that they appeal to the government for releasing him early. Shriram refused this advice saying – 'I have not been arrested for a reason for which one has to feel ashamed. I have been caught working for my motherland's freedom. Many people have happily gone to the gallows for this cause. Then, why should I be eager to get out of jail?'

His uncle had appreciated his nephew's emotions. But there was a subtle reason behind his suggestion. He said – 'A person gets bound by remaining in jail. If you were outside, you could do more for the country. Do not think it to be cowardice to come out.' Shriram said – 'I would not agree to come out by giving a bribe. When I come out, I will be more careful. I will be more wary than I was before and will not let a situation come in which I will have to come to jail again.'

Shriram came out after completing his jail term of six months. It was the month of November and the festival of Diwali had passed. Taiji had celebrated that Diwali with a strange mindset. She was sad that her son was in jail. But her grandson had arrived and it was a matter of joy. On the day of Diwali, Taiji was playing with the kid and said, 'Let your father come. I will teach him a lesson.' What could one explain to a 3-month old babe about what she meant by that sentence. Even her daughter-in-law did not understand the import. She could interpret its meaning only when her husband returned home.

Defining the Future Course of Action

When Shriram returned from Agra Central Jail, he was surrounded by his friends and associates on his way back home. Separation for several months had overwhelmed them with love and emotion. They failed to realize that his mother and wife would also be waiting to meet him; also that he would be eager to see his newly born son. Oblivious to these sentiments, his friends kept him surrounded for about two hours. Even Shriram did not realize that he was being awaited by his family. They spent their time discussing about future course of action; how they should plan the next stage of the struggle; who would play what role, etc.

His friends asked him to share his experiences in jail. How did he feel? What was the daily routine? How was the mutual relationship between the jail-mates? Shriram postponed answering such questions not because he did not want to answer them but because planning the future course of action was more important. He kept pushing away questions about his experiences in the jail more than five – seven times. When his friends insisted on knowing the details, he said – 'I will tell the story of the jail in greater detail some other time. It is not about just a couple of incidents. There are several things to talk about. To share all those will need many hours. Now, we should think of our future plans of action.'

Talks About his Time Spent in Jail

Still, he did speak about his experiences in jail. One such topic was about whom he remembered the most while in jail. Shriram replied – 'I used to remember everyone. But the life there was so busy that I was totally absorbed in those activities. I did not miss anyone too much. Most of my time was spent in reading and writing. Leading political prisoners on jail were given several comforts. Even newspapers were delivered to them. I got an idea to invest some time in learning English. There was no means for writing. Neither was there a pen nor paper. I then got an idea to write with a piece of charcoal on the iron basket. I began to learn from the old issues of 'Hindustan Times' and took help from revolutionary friends or from officers in the jail. In this way I learnt English alphabets. In two months, I gained enough knowledge to read a newspaper. After that, my knowledge improved with constant practice.'

His friends began to ask about some incidents in the jail. He did not remember anything off hand. Gangasharan said – 'O K! Don't tell us much. But do tell us about one incident which made you forget about everyone.'

Shriram went down the memory lane. He was quiet for sometime and then got back with an incident in the jail. When he was arrested and taken to the central jail, among the people who attracted him, one was a *sadhu*. His name was Raghavdas. He was an *upasak* (worshipper) treading the path of devotion. Instead of *Swami*, he preferred to be addressed as Das Raghav. If someone addressed him as *Swami*, he would request with folded hands – '*Swami* (Master) is only one and that is the Lord Almighty. I am just his *Das* (servant). Hence it will be appropriate to call me *Das*.' People were hesitant to call him '*Das*', hence they called him '*Baba*' or '*Maharaj*'. Shriram began to address him as 'Bhagatji' – *Bhakt* Raghavdas.

Ram Bhakta and a Freedom Fighter Rolled into One

Shriram told his friends – "In the course of time all the inmates began to call Saint Raghav Das as 'Bhagatji'. He actively took part in the independence struggle while submerged in the sea of divine devotion. He was considered to be a revolutionary and hence was arrested. Bhagatji lived in a Hanuman temple near Agra. Though all the idols of Rama Darbar were installed in the temple, it was known as 'Hanuman' temple. It is said that this name was also given by Bhagatji. It was a unique phenomenon where the temple was known by the name of the devotee rather than the Lord.

"Bhagat ji used to tell that one should become like Hanuman in order to appease Rama. According to him, Hanuman was the ideal devotee who was the embodiment of strength, courage, wisdom, knowledge and humility. He used to inspire people who visited the temple to imbibe these noble qualities. For teenagers and youth, he conducted some practice sessions inside the temple itself. He used to teach exercises and also tell stories from Ramayana to a group of eight – ten youngsters at a time. These activities were being conducted for the past fifteen – twenty years. For the past few years, he had included the freedom struggle also in his array of activities and training. He believed that the land on which the Lord assumed physical form should not be under foreign rule. Freeing the land of the Lord from the foreign yoke was the foremost duty of a devotee. With this inspiration, the Hanuman temple slowly got transformed into a training center for independence struggle. This began to rub on the wrong side of the government officials. But they could not lodge a complaint against him directly, because nothing that was taught in the temple could be labeled anti-government.

"The charges under which Bhagatji was arrested could not be termed directly as anti-government. But, somehow in a round-about manner, a case was framed. The police and other officers kept a close watch over the activities inside the temple. Ultimately, he was charged with the offence of giving refuge to revolutionaries in the temple. Bhagatji had asked the police to search the premises and satisfy themselves. The police found nothing there. One day, an officer said that there was a secret door below the spot where the idols are installed. He said that once the idols are removed, the door to the passage would get revealed.

"Bhagatji tried to push aside this remark in good humor but the officer was adamant on his point. Not only was he adamant but he tried to move the idols aside. To do this, he proceeded towards the sanctum sanctorum. Bhagatji stopped him and in that process, there arose a situation of physical assault. Bhagatji beat the officer and was supported by other devotees present there. Terrified by what was happening, the officer fled for his life. Before he fled, he threatened Bhagatji that he would have to face the consequences of his actions very soon.

"Nobody knows how it happened, but three days after this incident, the officer was found dead in his house. Someone had murdered him. When police conducted an enquiry, the previous day's events came to light. On the basis of suspicion, Bhagatji and three other associates were arrested. They were charged with the offence of attacking and killing a government officer. It was a serious offence and hence they were not released under bail."

After narrating this incident, Shriram said – "Bhagatji harbored no grudge towards anybody or any situation. He continued to work in his normal way even in the jail. He continued to teach people about strength, courage, wisdom, knowledge and humility. He advocated physical and pranic exercises for strength, self respect for courage, concentration for intellect, study for knowledge, and cultivation of divine love to imbibe devotion. Those who attended his sessions found themselves better and nobler than before."

Divine Protection to the *Sadhak*

"*Sadhak* never expects a divine miracle but in case of need, his faith and devotion is capable of manifesting a miracle. Bhagatji was a very hardworking person. But he found the overall situation in the jail very deplorable and humiliating. The British officers appointed there misbehaved with the inmates. Under their supervision, even the Indian officers behaved derogatively, especially towards Bhagatji. Even other people felt bad, but they were helpless. When the tormenting went beyond limits, a strange incident occurred. Nobody knew from where, four – five monkeys came and began to roam around Bhagatji. The moment someone insulted him, the monkeys looked aggressively and frightened them.

"Once some officers tried to move undeterred, with a stick, towards Bhagatji, three monkeys attacked them collectively. They scratched the officers and bit them at several places. The officers had no choice but to run away. Such incidents occurred two – three times. The news spread inside the jail that the Lord had sent his soldiers to protect Bhagatji. Jail authorities tried their best to catch the monkeys. They even tried to shoot them but all in vain. Officers had to finally mend their ways and behavior. They had to bow down in front of Bhagatji. Only then the monkeys stopped their violence. After a few days, the monkeys left the jail premises. They were not seen any more."

Bhagatji was imprisoned a few days before Shriram. His case was in progress in one of the courts. Police and government had tightened the noose around him. The prosecutor had declared him guilty of the crime. Necessary evidences were presented. In spite of that, Magistrate Thomson somehow felt that Raghav Bhagat was not guilty and hence ordered his release. The day Bhagatji was released; his classes and practice sessions came to an end. That very Bhagatji in his conversation with Shriram had told: '*Sadhak* should only worry about the present. It is important to decide on what is to be done in the present moment. What has happened in the past and what will happen in the future need not be worried about.

Home-coming After Release

It took quite sometime to narrate the story about Raghav Bhagat. In the meantime, Shriram received a stern message from Taiji whether he had any plans of visiting his home or he had decided to spend the time out of jail in *Vanvaas* (jungle). Shriram felt ashamed on receiving this 'message' and after spending a few minutes in formalities, he bid adieu to his friends and proceeded towards his residence. His wife Saraswati Devi stood at the doorstep with a plate decorated with a lighted lamp in it. Taiji was behind her. After she performed his *arati*, she stepped back and Taiji came forward. Shriram touched her feet in reverence. Taiji blessed him and said – 'Shriram! You have complete freedom now. You can come and go at any time. You are free from any household responsibilities. You can come and take these familial responsibilities only after India has gained freedom.'

There was a feeling of happiness and contentment on the face of Taiji as she uttered these words. She had offered her son to the service of Mother India. She felt content with her daughter-in-law and grandson. Shriram once again touched Taiji's feet and applied the dust of her feet to his head. When he entered the house, he saw his three-month old son asleep in the cradle. He called him by the name 'Om' which he had given his son while in jail, and fondled him. Om's mother was standing alongside. She touched her husband's feet. She asked – 'What is our duty as parents towards this child?'

Shriram said – 'Taiji is very much here. Who else can tell better about the duty of parents towards their children. Take guidance from her. I will keep coming. Did you not hear that Taiji has offered me to the nation? She has made me a roaming *sadhak*.'

Hustle and Bustle on the International Front

In the meanwhile, the attitude of British government had softened. Preparations were in progress for the Third Round Table Conference. Based on the decisions taken in that conference, the government policies were to be formulated. The British proposed to involve Indians in the state affairs to a limited extent on divisive lines. They did not want to loosen the hold on the empire. The sectarian decision that the British Prime Minister Ramsey Mc Donald took was as a result of that desire. Based on what was termed as Communal Award, not only Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists and other communal groups but also the Dalits and backward classes were given a separate representation in the state and central legislatures and governance.

This award was in fact a conspiracy to keep Indians divided amongst themselves in perpetuity. Mahatma Gandhi vehemently opposed the award. As a mark of his opposition, Mahatma Gandhi went on an indefinite hunger strike in Pune. Even in the society, people at large opposed this move by the government and the situation became explosive. The Viceroy Lord Irwin had to bow down and signed the Gandhi-Irwin Pact at Pune with Gandhiji on 24th September 1932. After this agreement, Dalits were considered as an integrated part of Hindu society. Muslims, however, retained their separate representation. Ultimately the step resulted in partition of India at the time of Independence in 1947.

Among Dalits and Backward Classes

Along with the announcement that Dalits and backward classes were an integrated part of Hindu society, their representation in legislative councils was increased. Their reservation quota was doubled. Gandhiji and other leaders readily accepted these amendments. After the Pune Pact, preparations were in progress for the Third Round Table Conference. Shriram had anticipated the changes that would set in as a consequence of the Pune Pact. He had begun to talk among his associates that those being called as Dalits were in reality our own brothers. There should not be separate quarters for them; untouchability should go away; the folly of taking bath after touching them should go.

There was a raised platform in the Dalit quarters of Anwalkheda. The holy feet of some local deity were installed there. Some ancestor of the residents was looked upon as the local god and worshipped. Shriram went to that place in order to impress upon the Dalits that they were equally respected members of the Hindu Society. He called out a person, named Kanhaiya, in the nearby hut and enquired about the details of the deity. He did not know much about it. He could only tell that the one being worshipped was a person who was amongst them seven – eight generations back and had saved this village from the wrath of dacoits. In the course of fighting against the dacoits, he had killed four of them and was himself seriously injured. After a week, he too died. Shriram said – 'He had sacrificed himself for the sake of the village. He is definitely a god for all of us. Entire village should worship him.'

Lokdevata – Gramdevata (Deity of the Village)

Kanhaiya said – 'We also very much want the other villagers to pay attention to this temple. They might not come and offer their prayers but it will be nice if they could at least repair the raised platform or even build a small roof over the platform.' Shriram asked what was meant by a small roof. He replied that he was referring to a small temple to be built for the deity. He said, 'Just like us, our deities are also poor.' Shriram said, 'Do no think like that. The feet of the deity are installed here. There are fifty one *Peeths* (temples) of *Shakti*. Let us call this *Charan Peeth* of *Gramdevata*. Every one should visit this place.'

Immediately a program was chalked out. It was decided to conduct *Akhand Ramayan* on *Margashirsh Poornima*. All the villagers were to be invited to the program and they would seek help from them. A temple-like roof was to be built on the raised platform after repairing the existing platform. When the estimate of expenditure was made, it came out to be eighty rupees. In 1930-32, one could repair a structure and also build a small temple with that amount! It was expected that each house-hold would contribute four *annas* (twenty five *paise*); which along with the offerings during the recital, could achieve the required target. Shriram's brigade began their work of collecting donations for the purpose. The villagers were surprised to hear about a *Ramayan* Recital for the installation of a deity in the *dalit* quarters. The elderly villagers even raised the question of the program being against religious tradition since it was encouraging so-called sacred religious activities among the *dalits*.

Shriram had anticipated these questions and doubts. He had clearly explained his young brigade about the answers to be given to such questions. He had taught the volunteers to cite the examples of devotees like Shabari, Kevat, monkeys and bears of Rama's era. Accordingly, the volunteers would say 'Everyone has the right of service and devotion. Inspiring people for *Puja-path* is a sacred task and not anti-religious, it is a sacred task. Lord Ram got Rameshwaram Jyotirlingam worshipped by monkeys and beers. Isn't it true? Lord Krishna started the tradition of worshipping Mount Govardhan and he had pushed cowherds into the forefront to do it.'

In addition to their effective arguments, the youth influenced the elders with their service-oriented activities. The villagers accepted the fact that these youth had done a great help to the village in times of need. They not only acknowledged their efforts but also held them in high esteem. Even during normal times, these youth worked in schools and local gyms and monitored the health and education of village children. They also participated actively in promoting health and in inspiring children to adopt hygienic and healthy habits.

In addition to these activities during the normal days, the role played by the youth on special occasions had impressed the village elders in a very strong way. Because of their inherent disdain towards *dalits,* they did raise several doubts and questions which were aptly put aside by the strong counter-arguments provided by the youth. Whichever house these people visited, they made sure that they received the minimum donation. Some people even gave more than a rupee. Seth Jadaavchand was a person who was most hostile towards the *dalits*. He gave five rupees as donation. In this way, the arrangements for *Akhand Paath* were made with great zeal.

Auspicious Beginning by Taiji

The day of *Margashirsh Poornima* arrived. The *Choudhary* of the *dalit* community suggested that Taiji be made the main representative during the *puja*. Everybody else supported the proposal and hence Taiji sat to do the *puja*. Pundit Dayashankar began the recital: *Varnam Artha Sanghanam*........ Five others were chosen to accompany the pundit. But all the five were uneducated and hence could not read the book.

Then an alternative arrangement was made in which two educated youth were shifted to the first batch and the initial two members shifted to the second batch. Thus, *Ram Charit Manas* was recited in batches of five people among which some were educated and others were not. In this way, 24-hour long recital of *Ramayan* was completed. It was essential to include the uneducated to participate in the recital. If a minimum educational qualification was specified then nobody in the *dalit* community would have been eligible. Hence to provide representation to the *dalits*, the procedure of chanting the main verses and its repetition by others was created. On the first day after full moon, the village deity was offered prayers and the recital was completed along with *havan*. The donations totaled to an amount of rupees one hundred and five. After deducting the expenses incurred for *puja* and *prasad*, adequate amount was left for the repair of the platform and building the temple. This amount was handed over to Shriram who in turn gave it to *Chowdhary* Shibu, who also laid the first stone for the construction.

Social Welfare Activities

Sainik newspaper of Agra was going through rough times. After the release of employees in 1932, the newspaper issues were coming out but they lacked the intensity present earlier. Based on Taiji's permission, Shriram had assumed the role of a wandering monk. He used to keep going to Agra, Awalkheda and Mathura time and again. He even went as far as Gwalior, Meerut and other places. In those days, Arya Samaj activities were gathering momentum in and around Agra.

After the Pune Pact, there was a wave of ever-increasing tolerance and affection towards the *dalits* and congressmen began to frequent *dalit* quarters without any hesitation. Arya Samaj was already famous for its principles of equality across the divisions of caste and creeds. Thanks to the Pune Pact and the efforts of Gandhiji and others, the *dalit* community was saved from being severed from the Hindu community. The propagators of Arya Samaj began to present this outcome in their own way. Shriram was very well aware of the Pune Pact and its outcomes but he listened attentively to others when they spoke about it. An Arya Samaj enthusiast named Anand Prakash came to him in Awalkheda. This person knew Shriram only as a young idealist of about twenty – twenty one years who possessed the determination to achieve what he believed in. After meeting Shriram, he first asked, 'I have heard that you take lot of interest in social reformation activities.'

Shriram corrected him saying, 'I take interest in social service and not in social reformation.' Anand Prakash tried to continue the conversation and asked, 'What type of activities have you been involved till now?'

Shriram humbly replied, 'I have not done anything. Whatever the Lord made me do, I have done. I have not kept a separate account of those activities.'

Anand Prakash felt that Shriram was trying to put him off. But at the same time, Shriram's voice echoed humility and sincerity. Hence he considered these replies as a source of inspiration for him. He said, 'You have installed the local deity of the *dalits* as the village deity in an effort to obliterate the boundaries separating them and the main-stream population. That is good. But, will it not result in spreading ignorance?'

'What kind of ignorance?' questioned Shriram. Prakash ventured to clarify and said, 'According to scriptures, there is only one Absolute God. He is formless. Are we not creating a problem by installing God in various forms?'

Shriram said, 'Anandji, I have not done a deep study of the Vedas but I have heard from those who have an in-depth knowledge that there is a reference to at least fifty Gods in the Vedas. In addition to that Rama, Krishna and Buddha are also worshipped as divine incarnations.'

Anand replied, 'This is due to ignorance. The Christians propounded one God and they are ruling the world today. Muslims also have one God and they have a big sway in the world. We propound multiple gods and hence are lead ashtray and cannot counter the criticism of others.'

Shriram had answers to all these questions but he did not want to prolong the argument and said, 'It is not our work to indulge in arguments related to fundamental principles. We are volunteers. Please tell me how we can work together and take this work forward?'

The Initiative of the Reformer

Anand Prakash's excitement was also fading off. He said, 'I have come here to meet you after hearing the news about *Charan Peeth*. Be it right or wrong, it has resulted in increased interaction with the *dalits* in their own residential area. This is a step towards reaching out to our brothers who had hitherto been neglected and segregated. Swami Dayanad also advocated embracing all the people irrespective of their caste and creed. I have come to you with a proposal.' Shriram kept looking at Anand without batting his eyelids. The silence was indicative of his enthusiasm to hear more of what he had to say. Anand Prakash said, 'Don't you think that there are no proper means for *dalits* to earn their livelihood?'

Shriram asked, 'What is the plan you have in mind?' Anand Prakash said, 'You make the plan and I will help in arranging for the resources.' They adjourned the discussion till evening so that they could discuss and review the plans. They met again in the evening and Shriram said that they should start '*Karagha Udyog*' (Weaving loom). This would give employment to eight – ten people in spinning and weaving work.

Gandhiji's Khadi Movement had not caught momentum then. He definitely wore *khadi* and those around him also followed suit. But programs like *Gram swarajya*, self-reliant villages, and cottage industries had not kicked off in the form of mass movements. About rupees seven hundred were required to start a weaving loom. Anand Prakash promised to provide half the amount through Arya Samaj. He said that he could arrange for the full amount but Shriram and others also should strive to raise a part of the money as a token of collective participation in the project.

On Hard-earned Money

Shriram told his *dalit* fraternity several times about the importance of going to the *Charan Peeth* daily and offering their prayers. He also insisted that they visit the temple after taking bath and wearing clean and washed clothes.

Karaya Chowdhari put forth his problem thus – 'We have only one set of tattered clothes. If we wash and put them out for drying, we cannot come out for work.' Several others also expressed the same problem.

'The clothes will be arranged. We are planning to set up a weaving loom for you. If that is set up, ten-twelve people will find employment in it. Weave cloth for yourself and also for selling it in the market. This will ensure that you earn some money', said Shriram.

'What use is money for us, Babu Saheb? The grace of other people is sufficient for us' said Karaya. Shriram explained – 'It is not necessary to live on others' mercy. God is pleased only when one lives out of one's own hard-earned money.'

After the *Charan Peeth* had been built, Shriram's attention shifted to setting up the weaving loom. Shriram made space for two looms in an open space in his own house. He built a small roof on the raised platform. The place was given the name of 'Weaving House'. This solved the problem of looking out a place to rent and spend money on the same. Five weaving machines were acquired and distributed among the *dalits*. They were also told to have patience before they earned their first wages, which they would get after the sale of the woven cloth in the market. They were anyway whiling away their time doing nothing. They were happy at the prospect of earning something, even though the payment would be delayed.

Two workers were appointed from outside to take up weaving the cloth. The people could not spin enough so that cloth could be made. Hence, for the first batch, thread was obtained from Agra market and seven yards of cloth was weaved. This cloth was offered at the *Charan Peeth* and given off to an elderly lady known as Kajali Bua (aunt). She had no one in her family. She was sixty – sixty five years old and lived on charity. New cloth was like a boon to her. Knowing that it was woven for her, she was almost in ecstasy. With a happy mind, she blessed them all, so that the business flourished and their desires were fulfilled.

Handed Over their Work to Them

Shriram ran the business for about a year. After that, a committee was formed out of *dalit* community to oversee the new cottage enterprise. As long as Shriram was monitoring the weaving activity, business flourished well. Also, other people took up different other kinds of work. Those who knew farming took up the work of making wooden instruments, bamboo baskets, clay toys etc. Anand Prakash also visited them every two – four months to see how the enterprise was progressing.

Because of Anand Prakash, Shriram came in contact with several workers of Arya Samaj. Among those, persons who were also involved in freedom struggle remained in long-term contact. Jagan Prasad Rawat and Radheshyam Sharma were two such people with whom Shriram remained in contact for the next fifty – sixty years. Jagan Prasad lived in Agra. Even though he believed in the tenets of Arya Samaj, he visited temples and celebrated festivals like Janmashtami, Ramnavami etc. After the weaving industry gathered momentum, Shriram again began to take active part in political struggle.

After the Pune Pact, the importance of *dalits* in the society had increased but the political climate remained disturbed. Uptill March 1933, the process of arresting people in order to teach them a lesson continued. According to estimates of the Congress, about one lakh twenty thousand volunteers were arrested. Shriram had not formally become a member of Congress. But being a freedom fighter, he was known as the regional leader in all Congress activities. During the phase of these arrests, Shriram made a plan to implement the non-cooperation movement in a new way.

The non-cooperation movement had begun in 1919. When this movement assumed a violent form in Chauri Chaura (Gorakhpur), Gandhiji called off the movement in the middle. In spite of this, the movement did not lose its steam till 1924. When the Muslim League leaders became indifferent to it, the movement slackened but did not die down completely. Not paying taxes, disobeying government regulations, going to banned locations, not caring for the imposed restrictions etc were still being practiced. Seeing their orders being flouted, the government also took stern measures in oppressing the people.

Partnership with Paliwalji

In December 1932, Paliwalji was released from Jhansi jail. He received a grand welcome on reaching Agra. He was aware of the activities Shriram was engaged in for the past two months. He extolled the installation of *Charan Peeth* and starting of the weaving cottage industry for *dalits* at Aanwalkheda. In the meeting which was conducted for his welcome, Paliwalji invited Shriram to come onto the stage and felicitated him with a garland and lauded his constructive efforts, and said, "This young man is the pride of Agra district."

After the welcome meeting, that very night there was another discussion in which a decision was taken to vigorously implement non-cooperation movement. The work began the very next day in that direction. In the following two weeks, there were at least forty meetings convened. They appealed to landlords and farmers not to pay taxes to the government. They told that the land was theirs and it belonged to India for which they need not pay taxes to a foreign ruler. 20th December was fixed as the date for launching the revolutionary step in Agra district.

Just as Gandhiji had chosen Bardoli for launching the non-cooperation movement in 1922, in the same way Baroda and Bhilavati villages were chosen by the volunteers of Agra. In the campaign conducted for two weeks, all the people were requested to assemble in those two villages. The police department was receiving regular reports on these preparations. Based on the information they had received, police realized that there was lot of enthusiasm to participate in the movement and that the people were filled with rage against the series of mass arrests that were made during the previous two years. The convention at Baroda and Bhilavati was being looked upon as an opportunity to give vent to this anger collectively. Based on the reports received by the police, it was estimated that one lakh farmers will gather, which would seal the distance between the two villages Baroda and Bhilavati.

An Unique *Yagya* in Baroda

The police ordered to disrupt the meetings taking place in each village. The command was to arrest those who were organizing these meetings. The main leaders Krishna Dutt Paliwal, Jagan Prasad Rawat, Dwarakaprasad, Dalpat Singh and Munshiram Goswami were banned from entering Baroda. They were asked not to come out of their houses. In addition to this, prohibitory orders were imposed in Baroda and Bhilavati to prevent any gathering there.

It appeared as though nothing could happen on 20th December. A meeting was convened on the evening of 14th December in Paliwalji's residence. Shriram was also invited to that meeting. Seven – eight important leaders of the movement were seriously deliberating on the matter. The government had done everything to disrupt the meeting. Shriram, who was listening to everyone, suggested that they need not insist on organizing the rally at the declared venue. Instead, he suggested that they perform 11-*Kundi Gayatri Yagya*. While *yagya* was in progress, they could disseminate the message they wanted to convey to the people. The *yagya* should continue for at least five days.

This idea was liked and accepted by all those present there. All the preparations being done for the rally were diverted towards the *yagya*. It hardly took two days to make the arrangements. Shriram's group made the eleven *Kundis* (pits for *yagya*) in just a few hours. The people were instructed to get firewood, *havan samagri*, articles for *puja* and the *prasad*. Jagan Prasad Rawat, Paliwalji and others were banned from coming out of their residences. So on 18th December, they disguised themselves, traveled through the fields at night and reached Baroda. They looked at the arrangements and came back pleased.

Oath not to Pay the Taxes

On 20th December, the *yagya* began under the priesthood of Anand Prakash. About five thousand people attended on the first day. Everyone had brought the required articles for the *yagya*. After everyone had performed the *yagya*, there were speeches for one hour in which they explained the atrocities being perpetrated by the government for the past three years. The people were exhorted to rise up against such tyranny and not tolerate the oppression at any cost. Slowly, the topic of non-cooperation movement was brought up. They made people take an oath that they would not pay taxes to the government.

The policemen stationed there did not have any idea of this before. Once they heard it, they informed their higher officials that people were being sworn not to pay taxes. The officials came running but it was already evening by then. The next day, thousands of people had gathered in the morning itself. They had named the program itself as

'*Lagaan bandi yagya*' (oblations for stopping tax payment). It was not appropriate to stop the *agnihotra* and other rituals and so the police exercised restraint. Among the officers who had come to stop the *yagya*, many were inherently religious. Some of them even changed their clothes and sat to do the *yagya*. Instead of stopping the *yagya*, they began to stop people from coming to the *yagya*. Slowly, when the effect of stopping people faded, they began to resort to stern measures. But the people did not budge. The program was in full steam in Baroda, whereas only few people gathered in Bhilavati. However, by early January 1933, the movement had reached in areas outside Bhilavati also.

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On the Path of Parikrama

Shriram's guiding power had slackened the rules and had asked him to do as much jap as was feasible during the morning and evening *sandhyavandan*. This relaxation in the rules was to enable him to participate in the freedom struggle. He used to do as much as he could during dawn and dusk and completed the rest of it some time during the day. If the count was not completed on that day, it could be taken forward to the next day too. He had told Shriram that he would take care of rectifying the offence created through this relaxation of rules. The result of Baroda *yagya* was immediately visible. People began to adhere to the oath of not paying the taxes. During the *yagya*, Shriram had told people – 'one could easily forget one's resolve taken on other occasions, but a resolve taken in such an auspicious atmosphere has to be adhered to at all costs'.

Inner Inspiration to Circumambulate Vraj

It was the second day after the completion of *yagya*. Shriram was in Agra. He had just completed his morning *jap* and meditation, when an inner inspiration arose asking him to visit Govardhan. He felt as though someone was calling him from there. After he got up from his morning *puja*, he told Mahaveer Sahai – "I am going for a few days. It is difficult to specify the exact duration. It will definitely take five – seven days. We will start the program in a new way after I return."

Mahaveer Sahai did not ask Shriram where he was going. He wanted to ask but could not. Shriram's face was aglow with a golden hue. During the time of *sadhana*, Shriram's face used to be like this. Seeing that brilliance, Mahaveer Sahai could not ask anything. Shriram began to make his preparations for the journey. There was nothing much to arrange for. He just picked a pair of clothes, some books, articles related to *puja-path*. He arranged them in two bags; hung them to his shoulders and was ready for the trip. Mahaveer Sahai followed Shriram for some distance and Shriram asked him to go back at the end of the lane saying, "You go now. I will go alone from here onwards. You concentrate on your work. I will be there only for a week. I have lot of work to do on coming back." Shriram paused a while during which Mahaveer Sahai gathered the courage to ask, "But, why have you decided to go to Govardhan suddenly?"

Unique Attraction

Shriram replied – "I too have not been able to find an answer to this question. I feel as though someone is pulling me towards the place. I will only be able to tell you why I am going there on my return."

Saying thus Shriram moved on without giving Mahaveer Sahai an opportunity to ask a second question. He did not even look back.

Shriram's trip to Govardhan was indeed exceptional. He was going there on someone's call or because of some inner urge. He did not even stop at Mathura. He did not even visit the *bagichi* where he had seen the idol of Gayatri a few years ago. He reached Govardhan by using whatever means of transport were available. He did not stop even to drink water on the journey. He had never visited Govardhan before. In spite of that, he never felt even while traveling that he was going to a new place. He found everything familiar.

As Shriram approached Govardhan, his sense of familiarity and belonging deepened. Mount Govardhan is spread across seven and a half miles. Mount Govardhan had attained the status of a pilgrimage place from the *puranic* story that Lord Krishna had lifted it on his little finger to save the people of Vraj from the wrath of Lord Indra. Thousands of people visit the place to do the 21 kilometer-long *parikrama* (circumambulation) of the mountain on special festive occasions. One can see about five – six hundred people doing *parikrama* even on normal days.

The moment Shriram reached the path of *parikrama*, he saw a young *sadhak,* Gayaprasad, doing *dandavati parikrama*. His method was strange. He was doing *dandavat* (prostration) again and again at one place. There were four-five other people accompanying Gaya Prasad and they were just walking along with him. One among them told that Gayaprasad is an *upasak* of *Ras Bhaav*. He would do one hundred and eight *dandavats* at one place and then take the next step and continue in the same way. In this method, the *parikrama* of the entire mountain would be completed in 21 days.

Panditji Accomplishing the Feat of *Dandavati Parikrama*

People were referring to Gayaprasad as 'Panditji'. Later he became famous as one of the great devotees of Vraj. He had made his ashram close to the path of *parikrama*. He spent his entire life there. He never left the proximity of Govardhan. He never even crossed the limits of the village. He never turned his back or feet towards Govardhan. On the day Shriram saw him doing *Dandavati parikrama*, it was the last day of the *parikrama*. On the occasion of completion of *parikrama*, a *yagya* was performed near Govindkund. Shriram also participated in that *yagya*. He was getting overwhelmed by Panditji's radiant personality. He was waiting to meet him. A fleeting thought passed through his mind wondering as if it was this person who had pulled him to come to Govardhan!

After the *yagya* was complete, Pandit Gayaprasad called Shriram by his name. He had heard Shriram talking to his companions during the last phase of *Dandavati parikrama*. Shriram's words had impressed him immensely. He had gathered the introduction to Shriram from his associates during the *yagya*. When Shriram approached him, he made him sit on the same dais. After exchanging formalities, Panditji asked – 'It looks like you are visiting Govardhan for the first time.'

Shriram replied, "Yes. Even now I would not have come. But I had some intense irresistible urge to come here. Normally it would not have been appropriate to leave it unattended. But I felt as though someone was compelling me to come here."

'Who can compel? Lord himself might be doing so. Maybe it was your own *sanskar* that inspired you to come here'- said Panditji. They spoke for a long time after this mostly about mount Govardhan. Panditji advsised, 'Since you have come here, have *darshan* of Mt. Govardhan. Ensure that you do the *parikrama* too.' That day, several questions were popping up in Shriram's mind – 'Did Lord Krishna really lift the mountain on his little finger? Could there have been a situation of flood because of Indra's wrath? Was it possible for all the people of Vraj to take refuge under this mountain?'

The Mystery behind Lifting the Govardhan

Shriram's logical mind was considering these stories as legends. In the language of Arya Samaj, such talks were nothing more than fairy tales or at the most *Pauranic* stories. But Shriram was also not ready to deny altogether the faith of the masses. While doing *parikrama*, he kept aside the logic and immersed in the field of emotion. He touched the stones lying here and there alongside the *parikrama* route as if he was asking them about the truth or otherwise of lifting of Govardhan by Lord Krishna in *Dwapar Yug*. He touched the trees and asked – "You might have heard the story of Govardhan from your ancestors. Tell me what the truth is." He asked the same question from springs of water. He looked into the eyes of birds and animals as if saying – "The man can give color to any event, but you might have heard something from the rocks, glaciers, trees, and caves of Govardhan."

Immersed in this emotional current, Shriram's *parikrama* was going on. In-between, he would deviate slightly towards right or left of the *parikrama* route and examine the nearby land. He would then start contemplating. At some places, the remains of caves could be seen. It appeared as if their entrances were blocked by rocks. If the rocks could be removed, one would get the passage to go inside the caves. At one or two places, he tried too and found his guess to be correct.

By evening, the *parikrama* had been completed. That day he slept in Govindkunj. There were some living rooms for Sadhus. In one such room, he spread out his bedsheet and when he was just about to sleep, a Vaishnav householder came and requested him to sleep on the cot as that place being in a jungle, there might appear some insects, etc on the ground at night. The same person arranged one cot from somewhere and also spread a bed on it.

Vision of Lord Krishna's acts in Dream

Shriram, who was tired from the day-long journey, fell asleep as soon as he lay down. In his sleep, he was transported into a different world which may be called the sub-consciousness world or inner world or the world of dreams. It would be unfair to call that experience as a dream since it was more of a *Bhaav Samadhi* wherein the layers of the past were being uncovered slowly. That was the era, when Lord Krishna performed his *Leelas* (acts) in Vraj and Shriram's consciousness also would have been present there. The lines written on the pages in the history of *Dwapar Yug* were being opened up:

"The preparations were in full swing for the Indrotsav in Vrindavan. Gargacharya told Nanda that Krishna be made *Yajman* (host) for the yagya. Nanda asked the Acharya himself to place the proposal in front of Krishna. When Gargacharya went to Krishna, he received a strange reply which he had not expected. Krishna said, "If you order me to do so, I will obey. But I do not like the Indrotsav." Gargacharya was surprised and asked – "What is the reason for not liking it when this is being celebrated from ancient times. What do you have against the festivities?"

Shri Krishna replied – "In yagya, we offer so many things into the sacrificial fire. Why do we offer oblations of huge quantities of ghee, milk, honey and rice? It is because we are afraid of Indra. It is because if we do not worship him, he will be furious. My heart says that whatever we do out of fear cannot be a festivity. I would call it a terror. Celebrations are supposed to give you happiness and fear cannot give happiness. Under the spell of fear one only becomes a coward."

Garacharya asked what Krishna wanted. Shri Krishna had the answer ready, as though he had anticipated it all along, and said – "I prefer a celebration that awakens love and enthusiasm. It will be best if we have celebrations in honor of our Gopa and Gopis. Let us celebrate the festival in honor of our cows which give us milk, butter and ghee. Let us celebrate the festival in honor of trees which give us shade, flowers, fruits and fuel."

Alternative to Indrotsav

Acharya Garg smiled after he understood the feelings of Krishna. He only said that by not worshipping Indra, they might incur god's wrath. Shri Krishna replied – "We should not be afraid of his anger. If you permit us, we will celebrate Gopotsav." Muni Sandeepani also supported Shri Krishna's suggestion. He further suggested – "Let us celebrate Gopotsav and worship the Mount Govardhan. *Yagya* should also be performed but oblations will be given in minimum quantities. Whatever quantity of ghee, milk and rice has been collected for the Indrotsav should be kept safely for the boys of Vraj. There should be only symbolic oblations in the *yagya*."

Govardhan puja was the beginning of a new tradition. Some people of Vraj opposed this, but most of them supported Shri Krihsna. On the day, when the Gopotsav was being celebrated by the majority of the people with the exception of the few orthodox people, who were still worshipping Indra, towards midnight, heavy clouds gathered and covered the sky. Lightening struck and heavy rain followed. Nand Baba told, "Even on the day Krishna was born, it was not such a heavy downpour as it is today."

The Turmoil of the *Gopa Bals* (young cowherds)

Some people blamed Krishna for this calamity and began to lament on their fate about why they listened to the words of Nanda's son and stopped worshipping Indra. Even Nanda was worried, but he was not angry with his son. But the *Gopa Bals* of Shri Krishna were confident that their leader would find a way out of this situation and the disaster would be averted. People left their bullock-carts and hovered around Krishna in groups. By the morning, there was water all around and even then there was no sign of the clouds thinning. It was as though they had become the soldiers of Indra and had come to punish the people of Vraj.

In spite of the deluge-like situation, there was no sign of worry on the face of Krishna. He was in a pensive mood. Time and again, he focused his eyes on Govardhan. There were cracks at several places due to the rain. During normal days, whenever Shri Krishna went to Govardhan, he used to examine these cracks closely. Once hidden in those big cracks, nobody could see that person. The moment Krishna remembered about these cracks, a smile lit up his face. He asked his *Gopa Bals* to follow him and went towards the mountain.

Shri Krishna led the group of enthusiastic friends and moved forward. He said, 'Indra has attacked us and we have to defend ourselves'. Krishna and Balaram together removed a big rock that had covered a huge cave. Krishna instructed that women and children be brought to the shelter first. After having sent them into the safety of the cave, Krishna and the cowherds went about looking for caves that were closed with boulders. They unraveled the caves that were sufficiently big to offer protection from the torrential rain. At the center of the mountain, there was a big cave. Shri Krishna knew about it. The door to the cave was closed by a mammoth boulder. The strong and young people could manage to jump over the boulder but not all. Krishna and his friends tried to remove this rock. Others also came in to give a helping hand.

Gopa Bals Moved Safely into the Caves

It was a bizarre scene. Shriram was aware that he was awake. But his consciousness was regressing back into the past. It was the same scene of the rain, about Mount Govardhan and the same Krishna-Balram. In addition to the past, the cognizance of the present was also intact. Thousands of cowherds on Govardhan were fighting against the wrath of Indra. Suddenly, the speed of the storm increased. There was ear-splitting thunder as though the clouds had exploded. Because of the lightening and the thunder, the entire mountain literally shook. People were badly shaken. They almost gave up hope of survival. They began to remember the incidents about *Vajrapat* (sudden disaster) that they had heard of from the *rishis*.

In the meantime, a miracle happened. The boulder that Krishna and others were trying to move broke into two pieces and began to roll down the mountain. Had it been allowed to roll down, it would have crushed many people. But the timely intervention of the *Gopa Bals* prevented the mishap and let the boulder move slowly. The entrance to the cave was enabled. A huge landslide happened and a part of the mountain moved and rolled down. The cowherds felt as though Govardhan was moving up. Because of the part of the earth breaking away, the cave became more spacious so as to accommodate the entire population of Vraj. Shri Krishna signaled and the *Gopa Bals* happily entered the cave and took refuge. Even other people who had taken shelter in other small caves also came into the central cave. In a few moments, the atmosphere inside the cave changed from worry to relief. It was as though the worry evaporated like camphor.

The peace in the minds of the people was restored. It was raining heavily outside but the people of Vraj were not worried anymore. They were unmoved by the wrath of Indra like a mountain that is not worried with the overflowing river. Shri Krishna had managed to save them all. Slowly, festive atmosphere began to get restored in the cave. People began to forget how the festive mood of the previous day was disturbed by the wrath of Indra. The new celebration that began on Govardhan continued for whole of the next day.

Lifting the Govardhan in Emotional Plane

Shriram experienced this incident of lifting the Govardhan not as a witness but as a doer. The celebrations had gathered momentum and Shriram was in wakeful state. He began to wonder why should people do any ritual out of fear or greed? Ritual should be to celebrate the grace of God and to express gratitude to all those who have contributed to the prosperity of our life. After completing his morning chores, Shriram's current of thoughts were flowing in this direction. It was eight in the morning. In the context of this experience, he began to examine the nature of the freedom movement. While he was musing like this in his cottage, he received a message of Pandit Gayaprasad.

His disciple told him that Panditji would like to dine with Shriram and has requested him to oblige.

Shriram came out of his night's experience. He was totally absorbed in that world uptill then. Panditji's invitation linked him up with this world. He accepted the invitation and again went towards the mountain. He observed closely those stones which he had seen during the previous day's *parikrama*. On the path of *parikrama*, Shriram saw a crippled man who was singing the glory of the Lord with great enthusiasm. A pair of crutches was kept on a stone nearby and whenever the cripple saw these crutches, he sang with redoubled enthusiasm. Shriram found this scene of a crippled singing devotional songs a bit puzzling. He felt like asking which path of *sadhana* included this kind of prayer. Looking at the blissful demeanor of the man, he did not dare ask this question and quietly saw him singing the *bhajans*.

The Faith of the Handicapped Man

Shriram walked around in that area for about two hours and then went to Panditji. During his walk, he had seen a few other unique things. He discussed about them with Panditji. The mystery behind some of them was unveiled. When the topic of the old handicapped man came up, Panditji said that he had the grace of the Lord. His story goes thus: He was handicapped and used to do the *parikrama* of the mountain with the help of crutches every year. He would do the *parikrama* and also express the grief of his mind to Lord Govardhan and go. This continued for five years. He was a burden to his family. Because of him, there were constant bickerings in the family. Hence he decided to leave his family and earn his livelihood elsewhere. One day while doing *parikrama* a strange incident happened. Out of nowhere a cowherd came and stopped the man in his tracks. In addition to hindering his walk, the young man snatched the crutches from the hands of the old man. The old man staggered on his feet. This behavior of the cowherd made the old man angry. But before he could say anything, the young boy held the handicapped and prevented him from falling and said - 'There is no need for crutches now. Stand upright.'

The old man did not know what to do. He was in a state of mind that was a curious mixture of anger, surprise and indecision. On hearing these words of the boy, the old man became all the more angry. Before he could utter something, he realized that indeed he did not need the crutches. He could stand erect on his feet. In that moment of joy and surprise, he began to look at his own hands and feet. Feeling joyous and healthy, he raised his head to look for the boy, but there was nobody.

Pandit Gayaprasad told that after this incident, the old man did not leave Govardhan. He took a vow to live there permanently. He typically did not even tell his name to anyone. Whatever food he received from people, he accepted as the Prasad of the Lord. He considered those crutches which were touched by the Divine Lord to be his idol of worship.

Return to the *Karmabhoomi*

After staying in Govardhan for five days, Shriram returned. During these five days, his requisite *anushthan* and *sadhana* could also be performed uninterruptedly. He met several *sadhus* and saints of Govardhan. Whoever he met, he discussed about *Bhakti, Gyan* and *Vairagya*. He developed a detached attitude towards political and social topics during this stay. On the sixth day, he returned to his *Karmabhoomi* (place of work).

The moment he reached Agra, he got a message that Jagan Prasad Rawat had also returned from Mumbai, where, he had undergone training in revolutionary activities. The main components of the training were to teach about cutting telephone lines, removing rail lines, disrupting the transport system and the repressive plans of the Government. He called for Shriram as soon as he returned. When he reached the house at Freeganj, he saw that in addition to Rawatji, others present there were Radheshyam, Krishna Jeevan das, Bhagwan Sahay and Ulfat Singh.

Rawatji updated them about the activities happening in other places. According to him, the media indicated that the atmosphere was apparently calm everywhere. In reality, all the revolutionaries were quietly active. They were busy in disrupting both communication and transport systems. Normally, revolutionaries worked either alone or in groups of 2-3 people. The reason was that less people would be arrested if their activities were discovered by the police. Since these activities were not meant to showcase their abilities to anyone, there was no need to exhibit their power of collectivity too.

Back in the Struggle

A team consisting of Govardhan Singh, Siroli Daddu and Shriram was formed with the responsibility of disrupting the railway services between Agra and Tundla stations. In two months, this team managed to stop trains five times. After trains were stopped three times consecutively, the administration increased patrolling in that area. Seeing this Shriram decided that something big had to be done to stop the trains yet another time. There was constant patrolling because of which it was necessary to divert the attention of the policemen for a long time. The administration had even announced a reward for anyone who informed them about the details of the people who were disturbing the railway system. Several villagers were waiting to make use of this opportunity. These vigilant villagers observed whether something fishy was being done to the rail lines because false information would entitle them to receiving a sound beating from the police. They would inform the police only after ensuring that there was indeed something wrong happening.

Transport Services Disrupted

A young village lad came panting to the policeman who was guarding the railway line seven kilometers from away from Tundla station. It looked as though the lad had been running for a long distance. He told the policeman that some people were trying to dismantle the railway track about three miles away. The boy was wearing an open neck vest and a dhoti upto his knees. The policeman enquired if the boy was speaking the truth. Boy replied – 'Yes, I am speaking the truth. I have even stolen one of their tools. Please see this.' Saying this, the boy showed the policeman a spanner with which nuts and bolts are removed.

The policeman felt convinced. He called two other policemen and followed the boy. The boy politely asked if he could go back to his village to which the police refused, saying that if the news proved to be false the boy would be taken to task. In this way one kilometer-long railway line was freed from police observation. At around one O'clock in the afternoon, a passenger train from Agra to Tundla approached at normal speed. Two young men were roaming near the railway track. When it was time for the train to pass through the track, they heard the whistle of the train. One of the youth removed a red cloth from his pocket and began to practice running towards the train on the track.

The other man said – 'It is okay. Don't try to do too much drama. When it is the time to exhibit your skills, do it then.' Saying this, he smiled. The person who was exhibiting humor even during that critical time of struggle was none other than Shriram who was spearheading this entire campaign. He was in a totally new disguise with a beard on his face, looking like a farmer coming home after a hard day's work in the fields.

The other young man was Govardhan. They again heard the train whistle. Now, he actually held the red cloth and ran on the track waving it like a flag. The train was moving at a speed of 30-35 kmph when the driver saw a man running towards the train waving a red cloth. The driver thought that it might be due to some problem in the railway track or an indication of some accident further down the track. Hence the driver applied brakes and the train came to an abrupt halt.

Explosive Destruction

The moment the train stopped on its tracks, 10-12 youngsters came out from their hiding places in the bushes near the train. They were probably carrying guns in their hands. The tips of the guns were covered in a bag. Those people unanimously shouted the slogan - "*Bharat Mata ki Jai*", "*Vande Mataram*" and went and stood by the bogie in which the guard was present. Some of the youth went towards the first class compartment also. The guard was made to step down from the train and was encircled by two men. They thrust the towel-covered gun onto the guard and hence he stood upright. The guard was perspiring in fear. They shouted that the first-class passengers should get down from the train because they were going to torch that bogie. The passengers began to get down immediately. The guard was asked to separate the first class bogie from the rest of the train. The guard took the help of driver and other railway staff in the train and separated the first class bogie.

The villagers hiding in the fields came out. Though this operation was being done primarily by a group of three young men, they had also summoned a few groups of youth from nearby villages to help them burn the bogie. They came with the necessary kerosene and other fuel. The kerosene was sprinkled on the detached bogie and it was set on fire. They had put dry wood and grass in the bogie before setting it on fire. The bogie was ablaze in a matter of few minutes. After this, Shriram and Ganga Singh signaled the other groups to run away from there and they themselves began to move away.

The news of this dare-devil act spread to the nearby towns and villages like wildfire. The news was printed in newspapers but not in detail. The district administration had suppressed this news. As a result of this people began to discuss about it in a much more exaggerated manner than it truly was.

Till the last, persons behind this incendiary act were not known. Police harassed several villagers. They caught some of them and questioned them and beat them, but they could not extract anything from them. Nobody knew anything about the youth. All that the villagers were told was that there were ruffians and dacoits in the train who were coming to loot the villagers. Hence they would have to put up a fight.

They had come to know about setting fire to the bogie only on that spot. They did not even know where these young people vanished after the incident.

The Years of Revolutionary Activities

One week after setting fire to a compartment of Tundla bound train, there was another incident near Agra in which a train was derailed, because the fish-plate was missing. In those days, trains did not move at high speeds. Hence, even though the train was derailed, they would not upturn and hence there would be no loss of life and property. After disrupting the train services five times, Shriram was asked to take up the job of disrupting communication services by cutting off telephone wires. He worked deftly and also drafted several other young men into the task. Whenever Shriram explained about the details of the plan, he emphasized that no person should be troubled or hurt during the mission. He said, 'We are trying to pull down the British rule through these activities. We must not end up hurting our own countrymen.'

It was decided to hold the annual Congress Session during the first week of April 1933 at Calcutta (now Kolkata). During the previous annual session at Delhi itself, it was decided to have the next session at Calcutta. After Delhi meeting, the nation saw a period of turmoil which led to uniting people for the cause of freedom. Mahatma Gandhi's hunger strike, Pune Pact, Muslim Conference, Reservations and other historic events had taken place during the past one year period. These issues were strongly related to the national freedom struggle. The significance of Calcutta Session had increased due to the historic importance of these events. Shriram stopped his revolutionary activities for some time and began to mix with people. He also began to focus on conducting meetings, networking with people and training people so that they could participate in the movement.

It was in fact the suggestion of Anne Saheb, the Acting President of Congress that the Calcutta Session be presided over by Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviya. In the course of this session, the resolution of *Poorna Swarajya* (Complete Independence) proposed during Lahore Session in 1929 was to be re-emphasized. The resultant effect was to put a seal of approval on the non-cooperation movement. The plan of action to boycott foreign clothes and British goods was to be given the final shape during this occasion. These were not announced as yet and were only being discussed in the upper circles. The government got an inkling of this plan. From the previous decisions and the reactions on them, one could easily guess that some far-reaching decisions were to be taken at the Calcutta Session. The government had its own spy network. From its information, it was decided that this meeting must not be allowed to succeed at any cost, even if they had to arrest a large number of freedom fighters or resort to most severe oppressive methods.

The Concluding Ceremony of the Calcutta Session

As a reaction to the government's stance, the enthusiasm among the people increased. There was a spree in which new volunteers were being admitted into Congress. Shriram resolved to prepare 1000 new members of the Congress before the Calcutta Session. He had just two months to meet this goal and hence started off on this activity with his team of four assistants. While this mission of enrolling new members was in progress, they received orders that maximum number of people should gather in Calcutta to make the session a success. The top leaders of the Congress had also clarified that people might be prevented to attend this meeting by the Government. In an attempt to stop people from attending, they could be arrested or prosecuted by implicating them on false charges or create such a disaster that it might be tough for people to even get out of their houses. The volunteers were instructed to prepare the people such that they would defy all such obstacles.

Shriram had a fairly good experience with the *yagya* at Baroda. The experience gained during the recent trip to Govardhan was also to be put to use. The experience in which Sri Krishna clearly sent out a message not to succumb to terrorism or greed and stand up to challenge the situation. He used the analogy of the Govardhan experience and equated the British Government acting according to their whims and fancies to Indra. He communicated this message through story narration and discourses to people and asked them to stand up against the oppression of the British. He did not however perform *yagya* and other rituals but made them take a vow by tying *Kalawa* (sacred thread) on their wrists as a pledge that they would attend the Calcutta conclave. This method of Shriram inspired other workers and they too began to adopt it.

A Report of the Dangerous Man

The British spy network became highly active during this period. Just like other places, a list was made of all the active revolutionaries. That document contained their activities, feats and the realm of their influence. Shriram's report was prepared by an officer named Inspector Martin. He had written - "This person might prove to be extremely dangerous. Though he is an ordinary volunteer of the Congress, he has influence upto the upper levels in the party hierarchy. His method of working is amazing."

Young people of age group twenty five – thirty possess lot of enthusiasm but lack maturity and sophistication. Shriram possessed a unique combination of both of them. It was because of these special characteristics that a senior leader of Congress, Balkrishna Keskar, had made Shriram his associate. Keskar had asked the editor of Sainik, Krishna Dutt Paliwal, that he needed a sincere and able volunteer. Paliwalji gave this responsibility to Shriram. Shriram, instead of suggesting somebody else's name, presented himself before Keskarji, who selected him. But Paliwalji did not like it. He did not let Shriram stay with Keskarji and got him back after a short while.

Martin's report had recorded this incident. One other incident was also included in that report. Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed in March 1931. In this pact, permission was sought from Viceroy Irwin to let the Congress carry on with the non-cooperation movement and also to participate in the Round Table Conference. As a part of this agreement, the Viceroy promised to remove oppressive laws and release all political prisoners. The government had agreed to remove some excessive taxes levied from the farmers after collecting the relevant statistics, which were to be provided by the Congress.

An Important Responsibility Given

Pandit Govind Vallabh Pant was overseeing the activities of Congress in the United Province in those days. He was in Nainital. They could not get the statistics about Agra region. This matter was brought up in the meeting of the group members. They did not have any option other than collecting information from village to village. Rawatji suggested that Shriram be put on this job, since he had in-depth knowledge of the area. The suggestion was welcomed by other congressmen and it was decided that Shriram would take up this job along with 3-4 other companions. Shriram was also present in the meeting and he started on the job right away. The moment the responsibility was given to him, Shriram immediately came out of the party office; his other associates identified for the job also followed suit. He went home, collected his travel bag and started the campaign.

Within four days, a report with the details of all the fields, their owners, tax amount of one hundred twenty eight villages in that region was ready. How was this done? Shriram and his companions contacted the village *panch*s and *patwaris* frequently visiting Tehsil offices. They obtained almost eighty percent of the information from them. Then, they went to some large villages and met the key people and found out the details of farmers in their village and about their tax levies. All this was made into a report and submitted to the Congress district headquarters. This way, Pandit Govind Vallabh Pant received the details of Agra district first. He expressed his surprise at how the entire information was collected so quickly. He asked that his congratulations be conveyed to the person responsible for this success.

Martin had written this incident while describing the style of working of Shriram. He also mentioned that this news about collecting such vast information in four days reached the ears of Gandhiji also. Gandhiji had commented, 'If there was one person like Shriram in each district, then attaining the goal of independence is possible within a month'. During Nainital conference, Gandhiji had called aside Shriram Sharma and enquired about his style of operation and examined it. Later during the meeting of volunteers Gandhiji praised Shriram and said that with such workers, no power on earth could prevent India from winning its independence. Martin had also written that Shriram was a very dedicated and active worker.

District administration had taken this comment seriously. Also Shriram's contribution in the preparations for Calcutta Session was also being closely watched. It was being speculated that he would be caught even before the conference began. There was however no apparent reason based on which this could be done. Shriram got a scent of the plans of the administration and decided to go underground. He relinquished the attire of a congress worker and began to wear *dhoti-kurta*. He grew a beard in place of a sparse moustache and began to look like a real farmer's son.

Until he had grown beard, he worked in the village. He prepared two hundred volunteers. Then, he began to contact people in towns like Agra, Tundla, Baah, Siroli, etc. This work too could not continue for more than twenty days. He could not hide his identity longer than that. Ultimately his style of working revealed his identity. The lane in Freeganj at Agra where he stayed began to be watched. Shriram used to go to that place once in a while. He would remain engaged in mass contact through out the day; and wherever the Sun set, he would stop working and stay with some volunteer in that area.

Shriram suspected that the police might be keeping a watch at the place that he had made his hideout. So, he sent another friend to go and examine the situation. Shriram's suspicion turned to be true and he immediately decided to quit Agra. Calcutta was nearly 1300 kilometers away. He decided to move slowly from one station to the other contacting people and finally to reach Calcutta. Seeing that his house in Aanwalkheda was also being watched, he refrained from going there. Thus with two pairs of clothes, a few books and a tumbler, he started from Agra in the first week of March itself. The exact date of start of the journey is not known.

Calcutta Conference

British government was determined not to let the session to be held and was arresting Congress volunteers all over the country. Through whichever places the vehicles bound for Calcutta passed, the government had placed watch guards. All the places in the radius of 200 kms around Calcutta were being closely monitored. In far-off stations, only those wearing swarajya attire were being stopped and questioned. But in nearby stations each and every one was being questioned. Naihari, Ranaghat, Durgapur, Asansol, Aara, Ghatshila, Haldia and Kharagpur had been made almost unreachable by the police. By the last week of March itself, a situation was created that no freedom fighter or a person who took the name of Gandhiji was allowed to pass. More than the police, informers in the civil dress ensured that anyone who uttered the name of Congress or the Session was handed over to the police. If anyone said anything in the railway station or outside the stations were sure to be interrogated.

Mahamana Malaviyaji was to preside over the Calcutta conference and hence his arrest was also to be ensured. He started from Banaras for Calcutta as planned and was arrested at Asansol. Over the course of next few days, eminent people like Swaroop Rani Nehru (Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru's mother), Dr. Syed Mehmood, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai and Anna Saheb were all arrested at the same station.

On second of April, Shriram and his associates reached Asansol. An inspector of police from Agra named Anantram was deputed at Asansol. Jagan Prasad Rawat recognized him immediately and warned his friends to move away since they had been recognized. Anantram immediately chased the group along with other policemen and alerted the others in the station by blowing a loud whistle. It was difficult to escape and hence Shriram and his friends did not even try to run. They were apprehended by the police.

The Congress workers were all kept in an enclosed space. It belonged to a landlord and he used to keep his animals there. The government had got it vacated so that it could be used as a makeshift prison. Temporary rooms were made by pitching tents. People like Devdas Gandhi (Gandhiji's son), Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, Kanhaiyalal Khadiwala, Ravi Shankar Shukla, Srimannarayan and other leaders were also held captive there. Malaviyaji, Swaroop Rani Nehru, Dr. Ahmad were also kept in a nearby place. The objective was to disrupt the session, which was not achieved. What happened was that people could not come in large numbers.

Since Malaviyaji was arrested, Smt Neli Sengupta presided over the session. The Presidential address prepared by Malaviyaji was read out in which he had congratulated Gandhiji on the success of his hunger strike and proposed that the pledge of *Poorna Swarajya* taken at Lahore Congress be reiterated, and resolutions for boycotting British goods and disobedience to rules made by the British be passed. It goes without saying that all of these proposals were unanimously accepted. There was one proposal about the '*Mutthi* Fund' (handful fund). It said that all volunteers and those who support the movement should daily take out a handful of grains as contributions to the freedom movement. The amount obtained from that should be deposited in congress office. Even this proposal was unanimously passed. Neli Sengupta said that the government had arrested more than one and a half lakhs people in the past fifteen months. To disrupt this conference, more than twenty thousand people were arrested. The British government had very well understood that this method of oppression could not suppress the people's resolve nor prevent them from having their say.

After the conclusion of the session, the people who were arrested began to be released. But Neli Sengupta was detained and was sentenced to six months jail. Because of intervention by powerful people, she was released but other participants were kept under detaintion. Couple of days before being released from Asansol jail, Malaviyaji visited that compound where several people were still held captive. He met the volunteers separately. When it was Shriram's turn, they began to introduce him by saying, 'He had been invested with sacred thread by you. His father is Pandit Roop Kishore… Before the sentence was completed, Malaviyaji said, 'Roop Kishore was my close friend. We have done *Bhagavat Katha* together. He had made significant contributions from his region for the Hindu Vishwa Vidyalaya.'

After completing his observations, he asked Shriram, 'How was the *shikha-diksha* (education) done?' Shriram said, 'After completing education in the village school and with my father, I am now receiving further education in the school of revolution.

Malaviyaji's Indication

Malaviya ji smiled on hearing the reply. He patted Shriram's back and said that he would visit again on the following day. He said that he had lot of things to talk to Shriram and assign some responsibilities. But owing to his busy schedule, Malaviyaji could not keep his promise. He had however asked Shriram to visit Shantiniketan of Rabinadranath Tagore. He further told, 'The time spent there will give direction to your work. Everyone should visit

Shanti Niketan. One cannot understand India without visiting this place.'

Among the seven thousand representatives arrested during the convention, four hundred were detained. There was a plan to charge them of rebellion against the state. Shriram was also among the people detained. They were taken to the main jail of Asansol. It is a matter of surprise that other associates of Shriram including Jagan Prasad Rawat were released. Jagan Prasad took the message of Shriram's detention to Paliwalji. From there, the message went to other big leaders but Shriram had to spend two more weeks in jail.

The moment he was released, Shriram was eager to visit Shanti Niketan. It was about two hundred kilometers away from Asansol. He asked the jailer about the route to be taken to reach Calcutta and the train to be taken. He spoke back in sarcasm that nothing was left in Calcutta and all the drama had ended. He further asked him to collect his wages of jail and go home. Jailer placed eight rupees in his hands and laughed sarcastically.

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Pilgrimage to Shantiniketan

After walking a distance of about one mile from Bolpur station, the soothing and enchanting vibrations of Shantiniketan could be easily felt – charming greenery all around, chirping birds, bubbling springs, playful quadrupeds and freely roaming people. The road traffic was minimal. Hardly a few people could be seen here and there, most of whom were young. It took about 6 hours by train from Asansol to Bolpur via Vardhaman. In Bolpur itself, one could feel the vibrations of the sacred abode of Kavindra Rabindra. Those days Shantiniketan educational complex was at the formative stage of development and hence there was unique atmosphere of peace and quietude.

Yatra vishvam bhavatyekam needam

A message in Sanskrit was written on the board at the main entrance to Shantiniketan Campus that could be read from quite a distance:

Yatra vishvam bhavatyekam needam (meaning – a place which is home to all humanity). This message used to stir the emotions of every passerby. Shriram's heart too was stirred by it. This land had been the *Tapsthali* of *Maharshi* Debendranath Thakur, father of Rabindranath Tagore, for about fifty years; and hence each and every particle of it was filled with spiritual vibrations. *Maharshi* Debendranath left his ancestral home in the year 1861 and made this place his *Ashram*. He was a renowned scholar, social worker and a spiritual leader of Brahmo Samaj. He favored integration of the best in western culture with the spiritual revelations of Upanishads to eradicate superstitions and outmoded customs from the Hindu society.

Those were the times of intense social and religious churning. Due to the differences among the top leaders, Brahmo Samaj got split. Keshav Chandra Sen was in favor of implementing social reformation process fiercely and quickly; whereas Debendranath Thakur was of the view that the reform process must be persuasive, slow and steady. According to him, any step taken in haste would not bring durable results; it might create avoidable discords and divisions in society. Due to this difference of opinion, Keshav Chandra Sen formed a new sect called 'Nav Vidhan'.

Maharshi Laid the Foundation

Debendranath Thakur, due to his upright character and spiritual knowledge, was called *Maharshi* (great seer) by the people. He laid emphasis on education and he did open a number of educational institutions in Bengal. In order to accomplish his spiritual mission, he acquired twenty *bighas* of land near Bolpur in the year 1861. He constructed a small mansion there called '*Sadhana Kutir*'. Rest of the land was used for agriculture, gardening and making a few shades here and there. The place was called 'Shantiniketan'. After a few years, he formed a trust and handed over the place to the trust.

It was a sheer coincidence that Rabindranath was born in the same year (1861) in which the land for Shantiniketan was acquired. As Rabindranath grew older, the *Ashram* too got bigger but the life was not infused in it. Before he took over the reigns, this was a quiet place that was used primarily for meditation and *Sadhana.* In 1901, Rabindranath Tagore started teaching in Shantiniketan with five students on rolls. This small beginning was made keeping in mind the basic aims of Gurukuls of ancient times with necessary modifications to make it relevant to the needs of the twentieth century.

Gurudev Gave the Expansion

Shantiniketan, which Shriram saw in 1933, was a grand expansion of the humble beginning made thirty two years back. A multi-faculty university had been established there twelve years back. Students used to study in the open or under the shade of trees. It was a co-educational institute. Rabindranath used to spend quite some time on foreign visits, but for the rest of the time he lived in Shantiniketan. His residence was known as 'Uttarayan'.

The natural and simple environment of the place deeply fascinated Shriram. Apart from imparting formal education to the students, attention was also paid towards their inner growth. There was a rich library on the premises, containing literature of various spiritual traditions of humanity. Students and visitors used to do collective meditation in 'Sadhana Mandir' Students were also seen meditating or studying under the shade of trees, on the lawns and on stone benches set up around the gardens.

No Assistance was taken from the Government

Amiya Roy, an officer of the university was very glad to meet Shriram, who had come to visit Shantiniketan as a sadhak and not as a freedom fighter. He was greatly impressed by Shriram's spiritual quest. Amiya Roy told Shriram, "Tagore took some difficult decisions when the plan for evolving Shantiniketan on the lines of a Gurukul was made. One such decision was not to take any help from the government. Due to such difficult resolves, we certainly faced problems in the growth of the *Ashram*, but their importance was realized a few years later" Shriram asked 'What was realized?'

Amiya Roy replied – 'Had we taken the help of government, we would have to submit to its pressures too. Gurudev Rabindranath won't have been able to give it an independent character.' Shriram counter-questioned Amiya Roy – 'Gurudev didn't seem to have taken any decision, whereby he appeared to be against government. In fact he had been frequently visiting foreign countries, especially Britain, without any hurdles from the government.'

'How are you saying that?' explained Amiya Roy – 'British government had honoured him with the title of 'Sir'. In 1919, when General Dyer's troops fired on an unarmed gathering at Jalianwala Bag, Gurudev returned that title.'

'What is the use of returning the title?' asked Shriram. Replying to this question Amiya Roy said – 'He didn't have the gun that could be aimed at British government. After Jalianwala Bag massacre, Gurudev traveled far and wide. One such travel was from Calcutta to Peshawar in which Gurudev used the bullock cart. During his journeys, he witnessed the wretched condition of India which awakened deep compassion within him. You know, he contacted thousands of people and inspired them to join the freedom struggle.'

A Revolutionary Wanderer

"During this trip, he tried to organize village panchayats and motivated them to solve the problems of ailing villages and remove poverty. About eighty village panchayats were established during this period. Had Gurudev wished, he could have used train for this purpose. But the railway lines connect only cities. There is no connection to the villages. That is why Rabindranath used a bullock cart. I hope you remember; it is Mahatma Gandhi who was impressed by his work and philosophy and addressed him respectfully as 'Gurudev' "

Thus was obtained intrinsic information about the personality of Rabindranath Tagore and Shantiniketan from Amiya Roy. Prior to Jalianwala Bag massacre, Tagore used to go abroad frequently. He spread the message of our culture in Britain, Denmark, America, Germany, France, China, Iran, Russia, Burma (now Myanmar), etc and also had a deeper understanding of their culture and ways of life. In these visits he also gave a glimpse of his global vision for Visva Bharti. It was due to the magnetism of his personality - apart from his lectures, contacts and meetings - that several foreign scholars left lucrative jobs and came to teach at Visva Bharti and became permanent residents there.

'Sir' Means the Title of Honour

Rabindranath Tagore wrote a letter to Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy, renouncing his Knighthood in protest against Jalianwala Bag mass killings. Amiya Roy showed its copy to Shriram; the contents of which he noted down in his notebook. They are as follows:

"The enormity of the measures taken by the Government in the Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India. The disproportionate severity of the punishments inflicted upon the unfortunate people and the methods of carrying them out, we are convinced, are without parallel in the history of civilized governments, barring some conspicuous exceptions, recent and remote. Considering that such treatment has been meted out to a population, disarmed and resourceless, by a power which has the most terribly efficient organisation for destruction of human lives, we must strongly assert that it can claim no political expediency, far less moral justification. The accounts of the insults and sufferings by our brothers in Punjab have trickled through the gagged silence, reaching every corner of India, and the universal agony of indignation roused in the hearts of our people has been ignored by our rulers- possibly congratulating themselves for imparting what they imagine as salutary lessons.

"This callousness has been praised by most of the Anglo-Indian papers, which have in some cases gone to the brutal length of making fun of our sufferings, without receiving the least check from the same authority, relentlessly careful in something every cry of pain of judgment from the organs representing the sufferers. Knowing that our appeals have been in vain and that the passion of vengeance is building the noble vision of statesmanship in our Government, which could so easily afford to be magnanimous, as befitting its physical strength and normal tradition, the very least that I can do for my country is to take all consequences upon myself in giving voice to the protest of the millions of my countrymen, surprised into a dumb anguish of terror. The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part, wish to stand, shorn, of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings. And these are the reasons which have compelled me to ask Your Excellency, with due reverence and regret, to relieve me of my title of knighthood, which I had the honour to accept from His Majesty the King at the hands of your predecessor, for whose nobleness of heart I still entertain great admiration."

Self-reliant University

After taking the round of Shantiniketan, Amiya Roy took Shriram to Sriniketan. This place was about three kilometer from the residence of Gurudev. At that time, vocational education and training had already begun with an eye on the future. Tagore was of the view that villages must be self-dependent. There should be industrial growth but villages must not depend fully on cities or towns. They should have their own solid foundation. Shriram asked Amiya Roy – 'You don't take any grant from government; there also do not seem to be any special resources. Then how are the expenses of the institution met?'

Roy replied – 'Whatever royalty accrues from Tagore's books goes to Shantiniketan. The guardians of students also bear partly the cost of education.' After a pause, Amiya Roy again said – 'The truth is that nobody knows how it is managed. Tagore also utilizes here the income generated through ancestral property. The number of friends of Tagore and the well-wishers of Shantiniketan is quite large. They also contribute. All these sources are enough for meeting the needs of the *Ashram*. The fact is that the need of taking assistance from the government was never felt.' Shriram's mind was filled with the memories of Kashi Hindu Vishwa Vidyalaya. In the context of new perception at Shantiniketan combined with those memories, Shriram's mind started making a resolve for establishing a similar institution.

The Management of 'Sainik' given to Shriram

After staying at Shantiniketan for three days, Shriram returned to his place of work. The task of re-organizing the publication of daily newspaper 'Sainik' had already been started in Agra. The freedom fighters initiated the process of regular contribution for this purpose. When Paliwalji came to know that Shriram had returned, he immediately called him. It was proposed to hand over the responsibility of editing and managing the 'Sainik' to him. Shriram said – "This way I will be tied up. My whole time will be consumed in the newspaper; no time will be left for participating in the freedom movement."

Paliwalji said – "Don't worry about it. The daily 'Sainik' itself is a movement. Is expressing the agony of Mother India less important?" Then he took Shriram to his chamber, where no one else was present. Paliwalji told him that in the coming days the office of 'Sainik' was to become a center of major activity for the freedom struggle. The revolutionaries would use it as a circuit-house for coordinating their activities. They talked for about half an hour. Paliwalji also disclosed the activities to be pursued near the office of 'Sainik' and made it clear that only he (Shriram) was capable of handling all that.

During the discussion, one more decision was taken. Paliwalji said – "Among the revolutionaries, you will be known less as 'Shriram'. We are contemplating that you should be made popular by your nickname 'Matta'. This will help us a lot." Shriram used to write poems and stories with the nickname 'Matta'. Shriram also liked the revolutionary extension of his literary name, but as regards holding the responsibility of 'Sainik' he said – "It is clear that 'Sainik' is a refuge for the revolutionaries. It will be published daily. But during the days of intensive struggle, can I perform my job freely?"

Paliwalji understood the meaning. In spite of holding the responsibility Shriram did not want to get tied down there. Though he knew that once 'Matta' accepted the challenge, he would complete the task even though he might have to risk his life; but he wanted to keep himself free for participating actively in the mass movements. The solution to this was found in providing him with an assistant. Thus Prabhudayal Agrawal was made his assistant.

News of developments and events at home and abroad were noted by listening to the radio. There was no main correspondent or any correspondents for getting city news. In those days, there was no tradition of appointing an assistant editor or correspondents in the regional newspapers. In national newspapers, a very small number of correspondents used to be appointed. The news agencies and the bulletins broadcasted by radio stations were enough for gathering news. Prabhudayal Agrawal was given the task of proofreading and sometimes taking down the news from radio bulletins.

In those days of intensive *tapa-sadhana,* apart from participating in freedom movement, writing and journalism, 'Mattaji' also used to do self-analysis. After visiting Shantiniketan, a thought consistently arose in his mind that after India gets independence, what will be his role? He recalled his complaint against Tagore which he made to Amiya Roy of Visva Bharti as to why he (Tagore) was not actively participating in freedom struggle. The answer that he got impressed him deeply - that working for the educational, cultural and moral upliftment of society is also '*Rashtra Sadhana*' and was no less important than actively participating in national struggle for freedom.

It was one morning of July 1933. From the evening of the previous day, hustle and bustle was seen in the city. Preparations were in full swing in the temples for the celebrations of the day. It was the bright fortnight of the lunar month *shravan*. People do special worship of Lord Shiva during this month. Shriram thought that it was some festival related to Lord Shiva. But when he paid more attention to it, he realized that it was the last Monday of *shravan*. The hustle and bustle that was being observed from the previous evening was the prior preparation for this festival. That day Shriram, after completing the daily worship, was engrossed in the study of Upanishads.

While studying Kathopanishad, he started musing over the character of Nachiketa. After the completion of *Yagya*, Nachiketa's father, seer Uddalak was donating old cows as *Dakshina* (offering). Observing this, Nachiketa asked – 'Father! I also belong to you, whom will you donate me?' Uddalak paid no heed to his question. Nachiketa again asked the same question. This time father didn't like it. He rather felt sarcasm in this question, though there was nothing like that. Nachiketa's concern was only that – no spiritual merit could be earned by donating old cows after the *Yagya*. This was against the scriptural texts and hence father should be cautioned; and in place of cows he offered himself for donation, with a view that he was a hale and hearty young celibate and that his donation would be auspicious for all. When the father didn't reply again, Nachiketa requested again. Upon asking the same question thrice, the seer lost his temper and said angrily –'I will donate you to Yama (God of Death)'

As soon as Uddalak uttered these words, Nachiketa's body became lifeless. He reached at the door of Yama in the astral form. Yama had gone somewhere. Nachiketa had to wait till his arrival. After three days he could meet Yama and the dialogue started between them. As the story progressed further, Shriram lost his consciousness. A different world opened in front of his eyes. It appeared to him as if he himself was Nachiketa and Yama was telling him to ask for three boons. Why three boons? It was because *Brahman kumar* (son of a Brahman) had to wait for three days. Yama was saying –"O Agnidevata! You have come here as my guest. I regret that you had to wait for three nights. Please ask for one boon per night. I have committed to give you three boons."

The Context Superimposed Onto the Self

Shriram started contemplating. It appeared as if he was watching a movie and he himself was doing the role of Nachiketa. Shriram was thinking seriously what three boons he should ask for. Three desires were causing upheaval in the mind, as if each one was willing to come first. Yamaraj said – "Don't hesitate Brahman Kumar! Whatever you ask for, will be given."

Shriram spontaneously said – "My motherland is being ruled by demonic forces; that rule should go and this divine land India should become independent."

'*Tathastu* (Be it so)' – Said Yamaraj - "After returning from here, you will see that the shackles of subjugation are getting loose, and India is getting powerful. It is standing on its own feet and everything is getting accomplished naturally. People will not even know that India is getting liberated under a divine plan. Now ask for second boon….."

Shriram said – "The natives of Heaven don't have any fear, not even of Yama. They are immersed in bliss, free from the worry of hunger or thirst. You know *Agni-Vidya* by which it is possible to attain such a blissful state. Kindly teach me that knowledge."

Yamaraj taught him that *Vidya* by which it was possible to attain heavenly conditions. The expansion of this *Vidya,* which can provide *Dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha,* will give rise to the ascent of divinity in human beings and the descent of heaven on earth. Shriram repeated the formulae suggested by the god of death. Yama said that these formulae would be helpful in solving all the problems encountered in future; they would generate the power to illuminate the path even in the dense darkness of night.

The god of death said – 'Now ask for the third boon!' Shriram said – "I want your third blessing in the form of *Atma Vidya* (self-realization), by which all the doubts vanish. What is the truth of this world? What is life? What is the difference between matter and consciousness?"

Yama said – "It is an abstruse and subtle subject. You may ask for anything other than this – take prosperity, ask for power and position, desire for fame and acclaim."

Shriram said –"No! I want only the key to *Atma Vidya.* Kindly teach me. If I am not worthy of it, I will strive to earn worthiness."

"Brahman Kumar! You can attain *moksha* (salvation) even without knowing this *Vidya*; if you wish you can ask for salvation but forget about this *Vidya.* – said Yama. But Shriram didn't waver. He firmly said – "Whether I get salvation or not, I am eager to learn that *Vidya.* I will propagate this knowledge among the masses. I will liberate that

Vidya which has been kept secret by the mystics for hundreds of years and have thus deprived the common people from it."

On listening this resolve of Shriram, the muscles on the tense face of Yamaraj relaxed. The hitch that was appearing on his face now transformed into a glad acceptance. He said – 'I will teach this *Maha Vidya - Sanjeevani Vidya* to the masses, for the welfare of all, through your medium.

The Message of Taiji

The vision vanished. The pages of Kathopanishad were open in front of Shriram, but he was not reading them. He rubbed his eyes and, lost in the just disappeared scene, closed the book. As he was getting up from his seat, there was a knock at the door. He opened the door. *Chacha* (uncle) had come from the village. He greeted him respectfully and asked about the news from home and the village. *Chacha* said – "Your mother remembers you very much. Why don't you leave all these activities?"

"*Chacha*! I am immersed deeply into it." – Said Shriram – "Firstly I don't intend to leave it. Secondly, even if I wish to do so, I can't do it."

Chacha had come to Agra for his personal work. Taiji had asked him to get the news of that *matawala* (free spirit – Shriram). That is why he came to meet Shriram. He further inquired– "Omprakash is getting one year old; don't you think about his future?"

It was decided that Taiji could keep the child with her so long as she wished. If she felt that he should get his education in the city, arrangements would be made accordingly.

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In the Ashram of Maharshi Ramana

Freedom Movement Comes to a Standstill

After the year 1933, the political atmosphere started becoming quiet due to the signing of the Poona Pact and the release of Mahatma Gandhi. After release from jail, Gandhiji announced the withdrawal of civil disobedience movement. Among his close companions, he said that any movement should not be stretched too long. The volunteers get tired. There should be alternate periods of low and high activities.

The clouds of Second World War had started gathering. Hitler had forcibly captured political power in Germany and was feverishly consolidating it. Though there were no apparent signs of the war breaking out in the very near future, the experts in politics began to realize that once Hitler had enforced a firm grip in Germany, he could become a challenge to British rule. As Mahatma Gandhi announced the withdrawal of civil disobedience movement in 1934, the attention of the freedom fighters got diverted towards other activities. In order to give a positive direction to people's enthusiasm, Gandhiji started a new experiment. He started calling *Dalits* and untouchables as 'Harijan'. He also launched a newspaper with the same title, which later on became the mouthpiece of the national movement. In order to eradicate untouchability and creating an environment of equality in the society, he initiated the program of Harijan upliftment. There was support as well as opposition to this program, both in cities and villages. A meeting of Congress workers was held in Agra in which the youth were expecting Shriram to give a lead to Gandhiji's new program. In that meeting the incidence of Chhapako was also mentioned.

Shriram said – "I will not hesitate to shoulder the responsibility proposed to be assigned to me, but I want two week's time before I take it up."

Preparation for Arunachalam

When the companions asked for the reason for delay, Shriram replied– 'I want to undertake a pilgrimage.' Shriram didn't say anything more on this subject and got busy in making preparations for the journey. The destination was Tiruvannamalai, at the foot of Arunachala (a holy mountain) 120 miles southwest of Chennai. Near Tiruvannamalai, a medium-sized village, an ashram was coming up effortlessly. The fame of the founder saint of that ashram, Maharshi Ramana, was spreading far and wide. Spiritual aspirants not only from India but also from abroad were visiting there to have '*darshan*' of the Maharshi.

Inspiration to visit Arunachala was awakened by a strange experience. The day he took the decision to visit Arunachala, during his morning *Sandhya* while meditating, he saw a mountain peak. The mountain was not very high. It didn't appear like Himalayas or any other known mountain regions. The hill was about 2500 -3000 feet high, with stones scattered pell-mell as if there were some war. There were shady trees, thorny shrubs, dusty roads and stony land all over the hill.

Divine Vision in Meditation

In the state of meditation, the journey on the hill proceeds further. A grand temple comes into sight. There are several lofty *Gopurs* (pylons) in the temple. Due to this the whole temple appears as a conglomeration of *Gopurs*. One *Gopur* is ten-storeyed. After crossing it one enters the *Garbhagriha* (sanctum sanctorum). *Shivalinga* is installed in that *Garbhagriha* with five gates. The devotees are worshiping Lord Shiva at all the five gates. In the *Parikrama* (circumambulation of the shrine) the idols of Parvati, Kartikeya, Ganesh, Navagraha, Dakshinamurti and several *pauranic* devotees of Lord Shiva are established. He is unable to identify in which province this holy place is located.

From the language of prayers recited by the devotees, he finds that this place is Arunachala located in Dravida Desh (Tamilnadu). The legend has it that Nandishwar, the *Vahan* (mount) of Lord Shiva, established some peaks of Kailash on earth; and Arunachala is one of them. In that prayer, one voice appears to guide Shriram – 'Visit this place. *Gyan, bhakti* and *yoga* – forms of Lord Shiva are made manifest here. In order to get the glimpse of these, come to Ramana Maharshi Ashram, situated in the *Parikrama* of Arunachala. Here Maharshi is waiting for you.' Voice stops for a few moments, and a melody of prayers is heard. Again, the same voice is heard – 'Ramana Maharshi is one of those few living enlightened beings who are at present actively engaged in making the divinity manifest on earth. At appropriate times, you have to meet other such ser-saints. Right now prepare for the journey to Arunachala.'

After getting inspired, in the state of trance, Shriram decided to visit Arunachala leaving aside everything else. It was due to this inspiration that he postponed taking up the new responsibility in the meeting of the youth volunteers.

As He Saw so He Found

Whatever was seen through the inner vision, the same thing was found in the temple of Lord Arunachala. This conglomeration of temples, which is spread on twenty five acres of land, is a symbol of fire element (Agni) of *Panchatatva* idol of Lord Shiva. There are more than hundred *Gopurams* in the temple region; and almost the same number of temples. There are many ponds situated here and there on the mountain. Among the various canopies, there is canopy of Dakshinamurti situated in the south of the hill. It appears that Dakshinamurti is preaching there. The priest of one temple tried to explain in gibberish Hindi the importance of that place to Shriram. He said - 'This is a sacred place - the foremost among the holy places. This is the heart of the world. It is considered a secret and sacred abode of Lord Shiva.' The priest also narrated that as per pauranic lore as Moon was lighted by the Sun, so also other holy places received eternal light from Arunachala and the mountain itself was formed in the shape of '*Om*'.

It is said that in Vedic times, Maharshi Gautam did penance on this hill. The great saint, due to whom the inner vision pulled Shriram to this place, was also residing there for the last thirty six years. When Maharshi Ramana took renunciation at the age of 16, he lived in one or the other temple of Arunachala for a long time. His mother came to persuade him, but he refused to go anywhere. After meeting his mother, he hid himself inside the caves and remained there till 1922. Then he shifted to the foot of the hill and the ashram grew up around him. Initially there was a hut made of grass. Maharshi lived in that hut for years. When the number of devotees started increasing, the ashram was expanded gradually. Shriram came to know these things while he was visiting Arunachala.

When Shriram entered the ashram, he was glad to find that there was no entrance gate; it was open from all sides. Coconut trees were grown outside the cottages. Their leaves provided shed in the ashram. On western side of the hermitage of Maharshi, some *sadhus* had made their huts. There were twenty – twenty five people in the hermitage at that time. Apart from Indians, there were Americans as well as Europeans. Followers of all faiths - Hindu, Muslim, Christian, etc – were seen coming and going out of the ashram. Shriram tried to explore inside the ashram; the aim was to contact some guide amongst the inmates.

Shriram in the Ashram

One devotee was seen. As Shriram was in search of a volunteer, so was the devotee in search of some curious visitor. This person, named Ganapati Shastri, was a resident of Banaras. He appeared to be sixty – sixty five years old. As soon as he saw Shriram, he greeted him with a smile and said– 'How are you?' Shriram responded humbly, introduced himself and told him the purpose of his visit: that he wished to have '*darshan*' of Maharshi and see the ashram closely. Shastri was glad to know this and said – 'Bhagwan (Maharshi) is about to come out of his hermitage shortly. In the meantime, after taking bath you take meals.'

Everyone was sitting in a row for the meals. It was a hall–like tin-shade. Ganapati Shastri said – "All the visitors and ashramites take meals together. There is no discrimination of caste, creed or religion. Even then some orthodox Brahmans want to have their meals separately. For them a separate arrangement has been made in the kitchen." Shastriji pointed towards a small space left for this purpose.

Shriram said – "When there is no discrimination of caste, color or creed, why has the rule of eating together at one place not been enforced?" Ganapati Shastri said – "In the three-fourth portion of the building all the people sit together; that small space is for the very orthodox Brahmans. Bhagwan has made uniform arrangement for all; he neither tells us to believe in casteism nor to disbelieve in it."

Darshan of Maharshi

Ganapati Shastri again requested Shriram to take food. He sat down for lunch along with other devotees. Food was served on the banana leaves. Just before the lunch was to begin, Maharshi came inside the shed and made his seat between the two rows. Some people in the other row stood up to greet the Maharshi but he directed them to remain seated. He ate his lunch silently. That day rice and *sambhar* were served. Maharshi was silent and hence other people also kept silence. There was pin-drop silence.

Other than the kitchen, there was no separate arrangement for the orthodox people. All of them used to sit together in front of the hut of Maharshi. There was no distinction of low - high caste or the rich-poor. In the afternoon Maharshi came and sat on his seat. Some incense sticks were burning. Some people were sitting with closed eyes. After the arrival of the Maharshi they opened their eyes and started looking at their revered Master. Shriram got up from his seat, went to the Maharshi and greeted him by offering some flowers at his feet. Maharshi picked up a fruit from the basket kept near him and gave it to Shriram. It was the fruit of pear. From spiritual point of view, pear represents a strong personality, yet it is sweet and filled with juice. Other people also got up from their seats and returned after greeting the Maharshi.

Initial Introduction

After everyone sat down properly, a *Brahmachari* began reciting *Vedmantras* rhythmically. One of the visitors said in between – "It will really be nice, if the meaning of these mantras is also explained."

Maharshi said – "It is not necessary for the common people to know the meaning of *Vedmantras.* Leave that to scholars. Those who perform *Japa* for self-realization, chanting is enough for them. The recitation of *Mantras* is helpful in inducing mental peace and meditation. Their recitation is not for education; it is a procedure, a path to achieve the goal."

That day Ramana Maharshi asked Shriram only about his well-being; and asked him to remain seated during that afternoon meeting. Frequently he would glance at Shriram and smile. When the meeting was over, Maharshi specifically asked Shriram "Come tomorrow morning" Maharshi used to sit on a wooden platform that was surrounded by a net from all sides. It was understood that he didn't like his feet to be touched by others. Whenever someone approached to touch his feet, he would withdraw. This was what his followers felt; though Maharshi never gave any clear direction in this regard.

Next day at 8:30 AM, Shriram sat down in front of the hut of Maharshi. Some more visitors were sitting there. When Maharshi came, all the people present there got up and greeted him. Once everyone had settled, Maharshi asked the first question from Shriram – "What do you do?" Shriram was not expecting this question; even then he answered – "I am awakening the masses about the glory of our nation and culture. For this purpose I am using my pen and voice."

"This is not enough – Awaken your inner strength; develop inner effulgence." After saying this he looked into the eyes of Shriram, as if he were exploring something there. He said again – "You are already doing that. You have the blessings of *Siddha Yogis*. You should continue worshiping the effulgence of Sun. Just take one step forward; and you will find that space has been created for the second."

Maharshi said further – "People consider that everything can be done by mere striving and movements, etc. They have their own significance, but the power in them comes only through spiritual endeavors. Both Vashishtha and Vishwamitra did *tapa*; then only the demonic terror of Ravana ended. Did Vishnu come on his own to kill Kans? No! The seers did *tapa* to invoke him. If the power of *tapa* is available, the ordinary looking people can accomplish miraculous feats."

The Nature of Miracles

"Lord! Do you believe in miracles? Do really miracles occur disregarding the law of nature?" – Asked Shriram. Maharshi replied like this – "Nothing should be considered as a miracle in this world. Miracles are nothing but the incidents that cannot be explained due to our own ignorance of the laws of nature."

Some people sitting there had the experience of miracles. They considered that to be the grace of Maharshi. They appeared to be curious to say something. Maharshi could catch their emotions and said – "In human life something unexpected and sudden too happens. This comes from nowhere; it is the destiny of a concerned person. Yogis, through their effulgence, only prepone or postpone it."

There were also talks of current affairs, but the main topic of discussion used to be centered on spirituality and *sadhana* for realization. He only answered the questions. Once in a while, the discussion would shift to philosophy, but that used to be only for a short period.

Shriram liked the discipline of the kitchen and dining hall very much. Food used to be simple and *sattvik*. No spices were used. One day during lunch an interesting incident occurred. After serving rice, vegetable, *chatani*, etc, buttermilk, fruits and sweet dish were being served. One European lady brought a spoon with her, as she was not accustomed to eating in Indian style. A volunteer of the ashram wanted to say something; probably he was trying to prevent the lady from using the spoon. Maharshi saw this and indicated the volunteer silently not to stop her from using the spoon. Maharshi always took great care of the needs of devotees in the dining hall. During meals, Maharshi used to watch caressingly everyone as the mother does while feeding her children.

Got Blessed by Maharshi

That day Maharshi Ramana called Shriram in his hut. Normally he met the devotees together. Even their personal problems were discussed collectively at the gathering. When the message was given to Shriram that Maharshi wished to meet him alone, he was quite surprised. This message was given to him in front of Ganapati Shastri, who had been living there for years. Ganapati Shastri too was amazed to know this. He could only say "You are going to receive special blessing of Bhagwan." When this young *sadhak* reached inside the hut of the Maharshi, the latter blessed him by raising his hands, before Shriram could even greet him. Indicating Shriram to sit down, he himself sat down. Without any prologue, he started saying – "There is no specific materialistic aim of your coming here. Only your guiding angle has brought you here. Is it right?"

Shriram nodded his head in acceptance. Maharshi said – "Now recognize, who is that guiding angle? Your own soul shows you the way. He is the teacher and also the disciple." A moment later he said – "You stopped your *sadhana* for sometime and devoted that time in the freedom movement. There seems no correlation between the two! Isn't it? But your ambition for freedom of the country and dedicating your efforts for that is also *sadhana.*" Maharshi continued:

"Is it possible to achieve self-realization by merely working for country's freedom?" Asked Shriram. Maharshi replied – "People have accomplished realization by doing this work alone. Gandhi has achieved his spiritual goal by this *sadhana* alone. His mode of worship is different. Even if he had not done that, he would have achieved *siddhi.* Incessant attention towards a set goal makes the viewpoint of the *sadhak* broad. He gets immersed in his goal. This goal is achieved only by selfless work."

Shriram asked –"Then the spiritual endeavors are not needed for those who are working for freedom?" By asking this question, he wanted to get assured of the spiritual upliftment of the freedom fighters. Maharshi didn't assure him. He said – "Not necessarily – One who remains dedicated to the Supreme Spirit during the struggle will grow spiritually. One should keep himself open to the Supreme Spirit." Through this context, Maharshi wished to express that whatever work is done, its result should be left to the Divine Consciousness. *Sadhak* should go on doing his work with pure and selfless heart. After saying this he became silent.

Inspiration on the Hill

Prior to making the ashram at the foot of the hill, Maharshi used to spend most of his time in wandering around Arunachala hill. One day while he was roaming around, he reached a cave. A poisonous snake lived there. Maharshi sat down in front of the cave and started meditating. He was so much engrossed that he forgot about the time. He also couldn't notice that the snake had come out of its hole in the cave and had coiled itself around his waist, stomach and back. An old woman was collecting the wood on the hill. When she saw this scene, she started making noises.

Maharshi's trance was not broken. That woman pinched the snake by the sharp tip of the axe she had used for cutting the wood and shouted - Hush! Hush! Due to the touch of axe, the snake left the Maharshi and crawled back into the hole. But the marks were made on the body where the snake had coiled. That woman now pinched the body of Maharshi by the tip of the same axe. That broke his trance. He started looking at the woman. The woman said angrily – "You will die. You will be nowhere. In this hot summer why don't you stay at one place?"

Maharshi said – "That woman appeared to be untouchable, but she was not ordinary. She was filled with divine consciousness. At one time it also appeared that she was a *Siddha* soul who had done *sadhana* sometime back in Tiruvannamalai." After this incident, Maharshi stopped wandering here and there. He made a hut at the foot of the hill and started living there.

What is the coiling of snake? Why did the snake leave when the woman said 'Hush – Hush'? Had the snake moved according to its nature, it would have bitten either Maharshi or that woman. Clearing these doubts, Maharshi explained the mystery of the snake and the woman with the help of science of yoga. The snake signifies physically the Kundalini Power. That woman was Divine energy and the scolding to stay at one place was the direction to share to his light.

Unique Moments of Spiritual Reflections

Shriram stayed in Ramana ashram for four more days. He observed that during *darshan* and contact hours there were discussions on all the religions and the methods of *sadhana*. The prime message of Maharshi matched almost with that of *Advait Vedanta.* Whatever he said was based on his experience. It cannot be classified under the category of any scriptures. Maharshi took keen interest in all the activities of the ashram, including cooking. He would pay full attention to what was cooked in the kitchen; he would first taste each item before it was served. If there was any deficiency, he would mention it. A new visitor once started criticizing the Maharshi in front of Shriram for this habit. When he was criticizing, Maharshi kept smiling; in between he would look at Shriram. By looking at Shriram like this what Maharshi conveyed, only Shriram would have known.

The day Shriram was returning from the ashram, Maharshi scolded a volunteer. In fact he had beaten the monkey of the ashram by the stick. Maharshi himself used to feed gram and other eatables to the monkeys. He said – "There was no need to beat the monkey. If the monkey was threatening the children, you should have also rebuffed it. In future, keep this in mind." Such a small talk appeared to the volunteer like an admonition. He felt that he had done a great mistake for which he should do atonement. He was about to weep and said – "Bhagvan! I will keep fast as atonement."

Maharshi took this incident in a lighter vein and said –"There is no need of fast. If you really want to square the account, search that monkey and tell him to beat you with stick." After saying this Maharshi started laughing. Others also started laughing. Shriram too laughed, but later on he noted down this incident in his diary. He interpreted the virtues of sympathy, repentance, justice, management, wisdom, etc in the light of this incident.

Pondicherry was not very far from Tiruvannamalai. Sri Aurobindo's ashram had already taken shape there. Intelligentsia, philosophers, politicians, etc from India and abroad had started visiting that place. At the time of departure, Ganapati Shastri suggested to him to visit that ashram also. But Shriram told that he would visit that ashram sometime later; the reason for refusal was that he had inner inspiration to visit only Ramana Ashram during that trip.

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The Endeavor of Purification

Remembering Sabarmati Ashram

On the return journey, all the time, Shriram was thinking about the moments spent in the ashram of Maharshi Ramana. His mind was engrossed in analyzing the activities of the ashram. He talked very little with the co-passengers. Even if someone tried to initiate the talk, he answered in brief and then became silent. In between the occupying thoughts of Ramana Ashram, suddenly he recollected the memories of Sabarmati Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi. He was there for three days in February 1931 along with his friend Rawatji. At that time, Mahatma Gandhi's time was mostly spent in nation-wide tours. Sabarmati ashram was his headquarter. In between, he used to come there. In those dates Shriram took time out of his busy schedule to visit Gandhiji's ashram when he had just been released from the jail and was preparing to talk to Lord Erwin in Delhi. During his stay at Sabarmati he was also supervising the arrangements of the ashram.

Rawatji got busy in contacting the volunteers of Congress. But Shriram went there with a different aim. He wanted to meet Gandhiji and also observe closely the activities of the ashram.

Maharshi Ramana's ashram was much quieter as compared to Sabarmati ashram. Life at Ramana's ashram was like a slowly flowing murmuring stream and that at Sabarmati ashram it was like fast flowing hilly river. The intense activity, normally observed at the time of an emergency or any serious operation, was experienced there all the time.

With an ardent desire to meet Mahatma Gandhi, on the second day Shriram sat in front of the Seva Kutir from 1:30 AM onwards. Around 5 AM Bapu came out. At that time, preparation was going on for the morning prayer of the ashram. He gave some instruction to the volunteer standing outside regarding morning prayer and the started for a morning walk along with a congress leader who had come from Rajasthan. Shriram was looking at him intently. As soon as Gandhiji moved forward, Shriram also followed him but he kept some distance between them. There was inner desire that somehow Gandhiji's attention should turn to him and that he should see him. While walking, it took about thirty – thirty five minutes when the distance between Gandhiji and Shriram became less and Gandhiji's attention turned to him. He turned back and said – "Your name is not there in the list of people who are supposed to meet me this morning. Anyway, do you want to say something?"

Dialogue with Bapu

Shriram bowed to Bapu. He considered it to be a boon to have been called by Bapu. Immediately he said 'yes'. Bapu said – 'Preparations for the morning program might be going on. Did you participate in the prayer?" Shriram nodded his head. Bapu asked – "Which part of this program did you like?"

"Everything was fine." – Said Shriram – "But the *Mantras* of *Eeshavasyopanishad* impressed me very much. I will repeat that prayer daily."

"What is the use of repeating the prayer?" – Bapu questioned. No answer could be given to this. Shriram started thinking. Seeing him contemplating, Bapu said – "People should live like birds; they have neither home for shelter nor clothes to wear; they don't even possess one time meal"

Shriram said – "But the humans don't have wings like birds. They also cannot live on trees like birds." Gandhiji smiled at this reply. He said smilingly – "You are joking. The essence of keeping the ideal of a bird in mind is that one should keep one's needs to the bare minimum. He, who stores more than his genuine needs, is a thief."

When Mahatma Gandhi was saying this, Shriram recalled the discussion he heard yesterday in the ashram. There was theft in the ashram. The thieves stole quite a good number of items including Kasturba's box. This incident was not reported in the police station. Gandhiji said - "I am myself responsible for this incident. The thieves believed that there was something worth stealing in the ashram. Further, I could not train people's minds to imbibe the spirit of oneness with the ashram. After all, thieves also stay here."

Gandhiji was all the more surprised to know that Kasturba had some box in which she had put her belongings. He enquired from Ba. Kasturba said there was nothing except the clothes of grandchildren.

Gandhiji was not satisfied with this answer. He lost his control –"So what! They should themselves take care of their clothes or their parents should do that. Why should you do it?"

After this incident Kasturba stopped keeping a box of her own. Among the companions of Gandhiji, it was Ba whose luggage used to be the least. The talks heard in the ashram were flashing in Shriram's mind like a lightening. Walking with Gandhiji, he was feeling that the atmosphere there was that of strict discipline. Ashram's life was not like any *Matha* or *Akhada*. It was a family of hardworking volunteers living under the protection of a stern guardian. However the guardian too possessed the heart full of love and compassion. It could not be seen but could be easily felt.

After a short humour on the ideal of a bird Gandhiji said – "Do you work for the Congress?" Shriram said – "No, I am not a formal member of the Congress."

"What do you do?" – He asked again. "I have made up my mind to devote myself to the service of the nation." – was the reply.

Gandhiji struck the correct note – "What do you want from me? How can I help you?"

"I want to become like you"   Shriram replied.

"If you want to become like me, then watch *Satyagraha Ashram* carefully. Learn how the people live there. Don't consider any task to be low or any person inferior."

Some Advice

After saying this Gandhiji paused, then said again – "There is a simple way. As far as possible, follow these two rules –First, don't keep clothes, food or money in excess of your immediate needs. I too don't keep. If you have to, then consider it to be entrusted to you by the society. Second, in the daily routine don't take anybody's help. Do your work yourself."

Talking like this they returned to the ashram. Volunteers were busy in cleaning operation. Morning hours are reserved normally for *Japa - Dhyan*. In this ashram too that was done; but along with the cleaning of toilets and bathrooms, the volunteers had to clean their own places of stay as well as their surroundings. Entering the ashram, Bapu asked Shriram – "What spots have you selected for cleaning?"

Shriram said – "Wherever I am asked to do." Bapu said – "OK! Other than that, clean *Goshala* (cattle-shelter) also. You have come from a village. So you must be having a good experience in it."

The First Lesson of Spirituality

He recollected that after meeting Gandhiji he wanted to get engrossed in the service of the ashram. He was given the task of cleaning. An accompanying volunteer was not comfortable with the task of cleaning and he wanted to run away as soon he got the chance. That volunteer shared his agony with Shriram – "I came here to become a Mahatma. I thought Bapu would give me some worthwhile responsibility. His men have given me the task of cleaning the toilets." A senior volunteer of the ashram heard this talk. He explained –"In the ashram routine, this is the first task. Bapu himself does cleaning work. If we cannot clean the dirt around us, how will we be able to clean the filth spread in the society." The other volunteer was not convinced with the answer; he left ashram after 2-3 days.

Shriram remembered one more incidence. After getting up in the morning, he was brushing his teeth. In this chore, about half-a-bucket of water was spent. One senior volunteer was passing by; he objected to it – "For brushing teeth, one jug of water is enough. If Bapu knows about it, he will be pained. He says there may be enough water on earth, but it must not be wasted." In the evening prayer, Bapu also talked about the same thing. While traveling in the train during his return journey, Shriram remembered several such instances. While contemplating on the formula of Gandhiji for becoming a Mahatma, he remembered Maharshi Ramana. He appeared to be a liberated soul. His spiritual attainment was much higher than that of Gandhiji, but the way to attain that height goes via Sabarmati Ashram – he felt. Thoughts again started flying in the same direction – 'Can there be any rapport between the fast pace of Sabarmati Ashram and the cool peace of Maharshi Ramana Ashram'? Several alternatives came to the mind before the train reached Agra. Another wave struck like this – 'There may be other institutions in the country like Sabarmati Ashram, Shanti Niketan and Maharshi Ramana Ashram; a plan should be made to visit them also.'

Imbibing Ashram life

As soon as he reached Agra, he kept the luggage at home and went straight to the 'Sainik' office situated at Belanganj. Paliwalji was busy talking to other workers of the press and the volunteers of the movement. He was very glad to see Shriram. Combining joy with humour, he said – "Come on Mahatmaji! For all others Gandhiji is the Mahatma, but for us you are the one." Saying this he started laughing. Other comrades present there also laughed.

The formalities of greeting and asking the well-being of Shriram on the return changed the topic for a few minutes. After that the sequence of discussion that was broken again started. The images of Maharshi Ramana's Ashram were fresh in Shriram's mind. In Sainik's office discussions were on about Mahatma Gandhi's initiative of Harijan upliftment. After being released from jail he had decided not to take part in any political activity for one year and solely concentrate on Harijan upliftment.

After dedicating Sabarmati Ashram for this work only, he shifted to Vardha (Maharashtra). The Sabarmati ashram, which was originally built as a laboratory for the collective practice of spiritual life 17-18 years back, was now reserved for the refinement in the tendencies of the society. After shifting to Vardha, he started extensive tours for the above mentioned purpose. When the discussion in Sainik office was going on, Gandhiji was on a tour of Sanyukta Prant (now Uttar Pradesh). He was visiting even those villages where no volunteer had gone till then. The main aim of his contacts and talks was to persuade upper caste people to abandon their prejudices towards Harijans and to advise Harijans to improve their habits and struggle for equality in all spheres of life.

Improvement will take place Automatically

During the discussion, Shriram said – "Bapu is entreating rather too much. There is one more way of Harijan upliftment." The volunteers started looking at him. Shriram continued – "If the Harijans start living in a neat and clean manner; and leaving their village start living in other villages, then no one will recognize them. They can easily mix with that society. Of course, this mixing with the people will have to be in a disguised manner. But in the coming days this is going to happen automatically."

"How?"– Said Paliwalji. The reply was – "The means of transport will increase. On finding the avenues of business and employment elsewhere, people will start moving from one place to another. Who will recognize a person's caste two – three hundred miles away from his native village? The name and caste of a person are not written on his forehead."

Indicating this possibility to be bright, Paliwalji said – "It will be better if we take up the task of mass awareness today itself about the program that we have to conduct tomorrow or day after." Shriram nodded in agreement. In that acceptance, it was also obvious that the same thing was in his mind even if Paliwalji had not reminded about it. He had total faith in Gandhiji's program of Harijan upliftment. In fact he was planning to devote his whole time in propagating his thoughts for one full year, during which he would totally abstain from political activism.

During his tours, Gandhiji tried to convince the upper caste people to abandon their prejudices about Harijans. He would say – "Castes have not been made by God. There is no mention of castes in ancient scriptures too. This tradition has become strong due to the division of work in ancient times and then continuance of the same work generation after generation. No work is high or low. In the same way no caste is high or low." Based on these arguments, he appealed to people to allow Harijans to enter the temples and other public places.

He also advised Harijans to abandon the habits of consuming liquor and eating meat, keep themselves neat and clean and start educating their children. Such suggestions were given to Harijans to improve their lot and not for criticizing them or proving upper caste people to be superior to them.

In some places, people put forward several arguments against Harijans. Gandhiji used to refute these arguments strongly. He would say – "How can any one become untouchable by taking birth in some community or caste? What filth is stuck to a person by mere falling of shadow of a Harijan that he has to take bath? It's alright that God's temple is for faith-filled and pious souls and they should go there. But who will decide who is pure and who is sinful?" At one village some people pleaded that Harijans don't take bath and hence they should not be allowed to enter the temple. Gandhiji refuted in stern language –"What happens by taking bath? Fish remains in water for its whole life. Does it become pure?"

The news of the programs of Harijan upliftment of Gandhiji regularly reached the office of 'Sainik'. His tours and messages were published in the paper as news and the incidents as memoirs. During his visits, Gandhiji also used to collect money for 'Harijan Fund'. Prior to his visit to a place, the volunteers used to create a proper environment and Gandhiji used to get as donation good amounts in his public meetings. In this fund, some rich people or businessmen or mill owners could also contribute big sums, but Gandhiji didn't beg from them. He was in favour of making as many people active in Harijan service as possible. The public that attended his meetings or people who came into his contact contributed to his cause by open hands. On this basis, his opponents criticized him.

Due to his programs of achieving equality for Harijans, some orthodox Brahmans called him antireligious, trickster, Bania, and antisocial. The answers to these accusations were given in 'Sainik' newspaper. Shriram searched such quotations from the scriptures and saints' discourses which supported Gandhiji's thoughts. On the editorial page, he also started a column in which a small article, containing appropriate examples and quotations, was published regularly.

Harijans in the Temple of Shiva

Shriram would find some time from his newspaper work and would go out to accelerate the program of Harijan upliftment. He also established a method of exchanging views and making contacts. Where necessary, he also participated actively. The prevalent tradition was that Harijans could not enter the temples of upper castes. They could only pray from outside; seeing the top of the temple was *Devdarshan* for them. In order to break this blind tradition, Shriram chose a medium-sized temple of Shiva in the upper caste colony of Agra. Hardly twenty – twenty five people used to visit the temple daily. On Mondays, the number increased. A program was chalked out to give entry to Harijans in this temple. A bigger temple was not chosen because the opposition could have turned violent. The number of volunteers was not adequate to tackle this situation. In fact there was no dearth of volunteers but in the name of Harijan upliftment most of them used to slip away. They did show bravado when making plans in principle, but took backseats when it came to implementing it.

Only selected people had the news of *Rudrabhisheka* (worship of Lord Shiva) in the temple of Shiva. Six Harijan volunteers agreed to participate in *Abhisheka*. There was no *Pujari* (priest) in the temple. According to Hindu tradition, the responsibility of the rituals of daily worship of a Shiva temple is given to a *Sanyasi*. There was no *Sanyasi* there. This aspect was being looked after by the volunteers. A score of people came to know that Shriram was getting the *Abhisheka* done by the Harijans. Out of them four people came forward to foil this bid. These quarrelsome volunteers were running a kind of society called 'Brahman Samaj'

It was the last Monday of the lunar month of Shravan . When Shriram came to know of the plan of resistance, he found a solution to deal with it. The opposing volunteers had planned to go to the temple on Monday morning at 4 AM and occupy the temple; and start the rituals of worship, devotional songs, etc. In that event there would have been no chance for others to do anything. As a counter measure, Shriram started *Stuti – Path* (prayers) in the evening of Sunday itself. On Monday, in the early morning at 3 AM, the *Katha* of *Shiva Purana* began. Four Harijan youth were made *Yajmans* (hosts) for this *Katha.* When the volunteers of 'Brahman Samaj' reached the spot at 4 AM as planned, they were taken aback.

Before they could take any action, Shriram came forward and greeted those resisting volunteers and requested them to participate in the program. With this invitation, the volunteers could not muster any courage to say anything. The resistance that was dominating their minds, almost evaporated. Other revolutionaries came to know of this inspiring incident of following the policy of avoiding the confrontation as far as possible and accomplishing one's task. They too adopted this method. In Agra division alone, it was possible to facilitate entry of Harijans in eight temples just in one month.

In 'Sainik' paper, news of social movements was also published in detail along with that of political events. Gandhiji was making vigorous tours to give impetus to Harijan upliftment program. He planned to visit Agra. In December 1933, it was decided that he would visit in March 1934. As a welcome gesture, it was planned to present a sum of Rupees two thousand one hundred to Harijan Fund. In those days, when the daily wages used to be one or two *Annas* (one *anna* means six *naye paise*), the sum of Rupees two thousand one hundred was quite huge. In order to collect this sum, a committee of sixteen members was formed.

Shriram was a senior member of this committee. For raising the funds he used a unique means of publicity and contacts. He published several incidents of Gandhiji's journeys. Among them one was that some girl donated her gold bangles in Harijan fund. Gandhiji said – "Your true ornament is that sacrifice which you have shown while donating your bangles." On one occasion, while collecting the items after the public meeting one ear- ring was found. Gandhiji immediately asked the volunteer – "There should be other ear- ring too, may be it has fallen somewhere." Someone said – It is likely that the woman has given only one ear-ring." Gandhiji said – "It's not possible. No woman wears one ear- ring." On another occasion one palmist asked him to show his hand so that he could tell about his future. Gandhiji rebuked him saying – "There is no need. I am a Harijan volunteer. I don't have spare time; and then if you touch me you too will become an untouchable."

The news of such incidents could not be gathered on the same day. It used to take some time. But regarding other news, Shriram tried to gather through radio, post, or someone who had attended Gandhiji's program or met him. Shriram used to write the news from radio quite fast. By the time the newsreader would pause after completing one sentence, Shriram would finish writing it down and get ready to write the other line.

In the meantime, one more child arrived in Shriram's family. She was his daughter and was named Dayawati. Son Omprakash used to come to Agra with his uncle or some other members of the family. The family members used to come very often; they would meet him, go round Agra, do their work and then return home. But Shriram had no time to pay attention to his son or other members of the family.

Those days Shriram had taken the responsibility of collecting money for the Harijan fund. This work and the daily routine of 'Sainik' became like inhaling and exhaling of breath. Out of the sum of rupees two thousand one hundred, Shriram alone resolved to collect one hundred and eleven. Other volunteers also went door to door for donations.

Fund-raising through *Bhagvat Katha*

Shriram adopted a new method. He tried to recollect the stories of *Bhagvat Katha* that he had heard several times through the discourses of his father. Then he arranged those contexts properly in his mind and announced conducting of *Bhagvat Masa Parayana* in the Sanatan Dharma temple near the bank of Yamuna River. Normally, the discourses on *Bhagvat* are completed in a week; devoting six hours per day for this task. However, there is also provision of reading through it in a month, but this is done at the individual level by the devotee. Shriram decided to do this experiment for the masses. Due to his busyness in political activities and the work of 'Sainik' it was not possible to devote six hours daily for this purpose. By spreading this program over a span of one month, it was also the aim to motivate the audience through discourses for such a long time.

The management of Sanatan Dharma temple accorded permission to conduct the program. They also started helping in the arrangements.

But as soon as they came to know that the *Dakshina* (offerings) collected through *Masa Parayana* would go to Harijan Fund, they revolted. They blamed Shriram of deceit, cancelled the permission to conduct the program; and started propagating – "Shriram is plotting to corrupt Sanatan Dharma; foreigners are providing funds for this purpose, etc" Some people also blamed Mahatma Gandhi. Shriram didn't care for these allegations. Inconvenience was certainly caused due to the cancellation of *Katha* program in the temple. But he didn't give up. He started preparing to conduct *Katha Pravachan* in open space outside the temple on the bank of Yamuna. Congress volunteers too cooperated in this venture and within three days the arrangements were made for the *Vyaspeeth* (stage for discoursing) and that for the seating of about one hundred fifty people.

On the four corners of *Vyaspeeth* four bamboos were tied and they were covered with banana leaves. There was no roof. The audience was motivated to sit in open space. The *Pravachan* began on *Magh shukla pratipada* (first day of bright half of the lunar month of *Magh*). On the first day, thirty people attended the discourse. Shriram began his address like this – "*Bhagvat Katha* is for purifying everyone. Maharshi Vedvyas has written this *Purana* to explain the essence of Dharma to the common man who cannot understand the complexities of scriptures like *Upnishads*, etc. Even the evil spirits get salvation by listening to it. Therefore the common people should not worry at all." By his strong arguments he settled the traditional *sanatan* followers' hash, though he didn't mention anybody's name. After this introduction, he made a daily routine of *Katha* of one and half hours.

After the completion of *Katha,* everyday people offered one or two paisa or sometimes one – four *annas*. The task of keeping the account of offerings was given to Mangilal. He was from Dalit community.

He could not get the opportunity to go to school, but he was intelligent. In spite of being illiterate he was good in accounting. He used to take part in freedom movement also. When he saw the obstacles coming in the way of *Bhagvat Katha,* he came forward and told Shriram - "We will take the responsibility of doing the required labour and supplying the necessary items." He had four more volunteers with him. So there was no problem in the tasks requiring physical labour or running here and there.

Dalits Managed the Affairs

When the responsibility of managing the accounts was given to Mangilal, he first hesitated. Shriram explained to him that the event was being organized for the benefit of backward and suppressed people; it would be appropriate if some person from the same stratum of society takes the responsibility of managing the affairs of money also. After this advice, Mangilal agreed to take up the task.

Within eight –ten days, the *Pravachan* started thriving. Apart from common public, people the volunteers of freedom struggle, writers, correspondents, etc also started participating. The comrades working in the office of 'Sainik' newspaper used to invite the public for *Katha Pravachan.* Some of them contacted even the intellectuals and people who had interest in literature. So they also dropped in, once in a while.

One day Babu Gulabrai also came to attend the *Pravachan.* He had good reputation as a litterateur. He knew Shriram as a journalist. This incarnation of his as a reciter of *Katha* was new for him. When the *Pravachan* was over, he got up from his seat, went to the stage and said some words in praise of Shriram. He said – "The style of *Katha* - recital of Shriram is like the Ganga descending from the Himalayas and coming onto the planes, which is fast, crude and carefree but it is pure and pious." Babu Gulabrai laid stress on his carefreeness. The important message of this lecture was - "Till now I knew Shriramji 'Matta' as a journalist, a writer and a social volunteer. It is his new incarnation as a *Katha Vyas.* On this occasion, I will call him 'Panditji'; in future also I will call him by this honorific name. I will be happy if you (audience) also call him by this name."

And Now Pandit Shriram

The people present there delightedly applauded the announcement of Babu Gulabrai. Shriram Sharma 'Matta' now got recognition as Pandit Shriram Sharma 'Matta'. In those days, the title of 'Pandit' was not conferred easily. A person was called Pandit only when he had mastered the knowledge of scriptures, and achieved purity of mind and thought. A learned and respectable person used to give this kind of recognition. The authoritative declaration of Babu Gulabrai was according to that tradition. From that day, people coming to *Katha* started calling him either as 'Mattaji' or 'Panditji'. For the senior volunteers, elderly people or friends, of course, he remained Shriram later on too.

By the time *Masa Parayana* was completed, Pandit Shriram's resolve too was fulfilled. The *Dakshina* offered on the *Pothi* (book) of *Bhagvat* amounted to Rupees one hundred and seventy one. The expenditure of the program was borne by Shriram himself and other volunteers like Mangilal, etc. It was decided that the entire amount received in the offerings, though it was more than the target, should be given to the Fund. The amount could have been easily collected by going to the village or contacting some twenty – thirty rich men. The real achievement was to convey the message of purification of society to about 250 -300 people.

Taiji had got the news of *Bhagvat Katha* fifteen –twenty days earlier. She was happy that her son was following on the footsteps of his father. She bowed in front of Thakurji (idol of Lord Krishna) and said – "Lord! Guide my darling (son) on the footsteps of his ancestors." Then she changed her mind. In the emotional mood this thought did come, but immediately she regretted also – "Does Thakurji not know what is good for Shriram? He will himself guide Shriram on His path. I should not have shown haste." With these counter thoughts she got up and moved away from Dwarkadheesh (same idol). Two weeks after that request to the Lord, the news came that the society had started calling his darling 'Panditji'; she got deeply moved.

Mother's Wait

That day she was really waiting for Shriram. From the day she got the news of *Katha Pravachan,* she had an intense desire that she should meet Pandit Shriram; call him as Pandit. The day Shriram was to come from Agra, she had gone to the main gate of the *Haveli* (ancestral house) several times. Earlier three –four times, when he came home after being released from jail, he went straight to his friends. With a view to stop this happen again, she had instructed all concerned that Shriram should come straight to home. She also told his friends – "Don't stop my son on the way; let him first meet his mother."

Apart from Taiji, there was one more person in the *Haveli* – the better-half of Pandit Shriram - who was overpowered by waves of emotion; but she was silent. In the *Haveli*, she was called *Bahurani* (literally meaning daughter-in-law). Friends of Panditji called her *Bhabhiji* (brother's wife). Panditji himself used to call her by the name of his son 'Om Prakash'. Later on, after the birth of the daughter, he started calling her '*Daya ki Maa*' (mother of Daya) or simply 'Daya'. It appeared as if the name and identity of that silent *Sadhika* (Saraswati Devi) were almost forgotten. The *Sadhana* of *Grihastha Ashram* cannot be accomplished without melting like this. According to the tradition prevailing at that time, Bahuji also called Pandit Shriram in the guise of his son. There were hardly any instances when there was any reason to call him. After the marriage, Pandit Shriram hardly stayed at home. Most of the time, he was busy either in freedom movement or in the work of 'Sainik'. Whenever he visited home and if there was any urgency to call him, Bahuji would follow the tradition of her time. Probably, she too was waiting for her adored husband, and it was likely that she too might have been impatient to meet him; but she was controlling herself.

Meeting with the Family

From the hustle and bustle at the main gate, Bahuji understood that Pandit Shriramji had arrived. The joy on the face of Taiji was quite visible. The way the widowhood and old age causes the Indian woman to wither, that was totally absent in Taiji's behaviour at that time. Taiji was behaving boastfully for the obvious reason that her child, treading the right path, had achieved first success and had brought home his first earning. She was coming forward (to receive him) saying – 'Now my Shriram too has become Pandit. I have heard that great scholars have called you as Pandit. What have you brought for me? Did you bring any gift for Bahu or not? You would have certainly brought dolls for Om and Daya?'

There was a kind of torrent of queries. As soon as Shriram gifted his mother a *Sari*, the tears of joy rolled down her eyes. With these tears of love, she became eager to see the gifts for Bahu and children. She was unable to manage her joy. She took her darling straight to Puja room, bowed her head in front of Thakurji and then patted him on the back as a mark of blessing of her Lord.

For a full day Shriram remained at home; caressed the children, enquired about the well-being of his wife. There was neither any complaint nor any expectation from her side. When asked about the general welfare, she replied humbly – 'There is no dearth of anything here. Of course, I would have considered myself more fortunate, had I got the chance to serve you there. Even in the present condition, there is no complaint."

Shriram said – "If Taiji says, I will immediately call you there. Anyway I will be visiting home more often. Let Om grow up a little more. We will admit him in some school in Agra. So he will be with us all the time." Bahuji was listening silently. Her silence itself was a sign of her acceptance.

Meeting Again with Bapu

In the meantime Mahatma Gandhi came to Agra. His public meeting was arranged at Kachahari road. He was to stay at Agra only for four hours. Therefore, only two programs were kept – a meeting with volunteers and a public meeting in the evening. Meeting with volunteers was arranged in the office of Congress. There Gandhiji said – "I have taken a vow to forget about the freedom movement for one year. In our society, there are eighty percent people who belong to suppressed classes - Harijans, aboriginal tribes, backward classes or Dalits. Without uplifting them there is no meaning of independence. Such independence would be useful only to ten-fifteen percent people. Majority of the people will still remain under the yoke of poverty and slavery."

Pandit Shriram was also introduced to Gandhiji in that meeting. Paliwalji mentioned about his contribution to Harijan upliftment in that region. When he was informed about the *Dakshina* of *Bhagvat Pravachan*, Gandhiji smiled and said - "Offerings on the *Pothi* belong to God. The idea of using God's money for his subjects is unique. I got an idea for the public meeting in the evening."

About one thousand people attended Gandhiji's meeting at Kachahari road. At that time the population of Agra would have been hardly twenty five to thirty thousand. Thus, the gathering was quite good. In his address, Bapu mentioned about Shriram's *Bhagvat Pravachan*. His inspiration was that the money being spent in the temples and religious functions should now be utilized in Harijan upliftment. He said – "Pandit Shriram has collected some money through *Bhagvat Katha*. This has given me great pleasure. It doesn't matter how much money is collected. What matters is that he has shown the righteous path to the public. The gentleman who has called him Pandit is very right."

Mention of Panditji in the Address

In his address, Bapu elaborated about his Harijan upliftment program. He stressed the need to allow Harijans to enter the temples and to draw water from public wells; given equal status in community functions and even welcomed in upper caste homes. When the time for giving contribution to the Harijan fund came, the volunteers asked Shriram to lead them. Gandhiji said – "On behalf of this city, a Pandit is coming to donate. This is a good sign. We, the upper caste people, should take the initiative in this direction. If we try to rectify the error committed by our ancestors, the upliftment of Harijans will not take more than a year."

'When Panditji (Shriram) reached near Bapu to hand over the contribution of Agra to Harijan fund, Bapu became emotional. He got up and held both hands of Shriram in his hands. He touched his closed fist with his nose. As elder people smell the forehead of children, in the same way he expressed his love towards Panditji. Then he said – "*Bhagvat Shastra* is for everyone. Is it? I have heard that this spiritual instruction is only for those who possess a loving and compassionate heart. It is not for them who use logic and intelligence, are inflated with ego and consider themselves to be high-class. Is it true?"

Shriram was overwhelmed by this behaviour of Gandhiji. He could not answer. He wanted to say – "You are right", but could only nod his head in agreement. Bapu asked one more question – "What have you given in the fund from your pocket? The sum of rupees one hundred seventy one belongs to *Bhagvatji*. What is yours?"

"I want to keep it secret." Panditji composed himself and said – "If you allow me then I can tell you in your ear with the condition that you will not tell others." Bapu agreed. Shriram told him in the ear. Gandhiji's face glowed with joy. He patted him lightly on the cheek.

Several years after this incident, Poojya Gurudev told that he gave his father's gold buttons used in his *Kurta* in Bapu's fund. In order to get these buttons, he went to Aanwalkheda. Taiji had entrusted these gold buttons to Bahurani. When Taiji came to know about it, she was felt proud of her son's virtue of selfless giving.

Bapu said – "Something is still left with you. You have hidden it. Give that also to me." Panditji was surprised and started looking at Gandhiji; and then said – "I have hidden nothing." Gandhiji said – "See the pocket of your *Kurta*. I can see it from here. Perhaps one rupee coin is there."

Shriram put his hand in the pocket. Bapu's penetrating view, humour and forthright talk made Shriram laugh. Smilingly he took out the coin and kept at the feet of Bapu. Raising his hand Bapu said – "Now it's alright. A Brahman should believe in God and stop worrying about the subsistence of self. I too don't keep anything with me. There is no pocket in my clothes. By caste I am *Bania* (of the class of businessmen); even then I have resolved to observe *aparigrah* (non-possession)."

Panditji immediately said – "Bapu! *Aparigrah* is my resolve too. I have also left my concerns to God. Let Him manage."

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The Round of Preparations

The Challenges of Religious Debates

Brahmans expressed their anguish on Shriram's donating the *Dakshina* of *Bhagvat Pravachan* to Harijan Fund. Pandit Dulichand Shastri was of the opinion that the offerings received in temples, *shastra pravachans*, or *katha - kirtans* should be used only in *Brahmabhoj* (feeding the Brahmans). Under his leadership, other Brahmans too started saying that giving the offerings of *Katha Pravachan* to *sudras* (Harijans) was a sacrilage. Letters of protest started pouring in the office of 'Sainik'. Paliwalji would keep those letters in front of Shriram and smile. For some time, appropriate answers were given by Shriram, but the protests remained unabated. The same contention used to be repeated in one way or the other.

When the complaints didn't stop even after replying personally to all the objections, Shriram published a small article in 'Sainik'. In the same issue, he also published the contents of eight letters objecting to *Bhagvat Katha*. The title of the article, which was essentially a reply to those letters, was '*Hari ko bhajai so hari ka hoi*' (meaning – God loves those who remember him constantly). Giving examples from scriptures and the life sketches of saints, it was established in the article that - "Caste, color, creed, state of health, education, etc are no barriers to attain God's love. Even the most degraded persons, after coming to the refuge of God, have attained salvation. When God's love can be obtained by everyone without any hindrance, then a petty cash received in His name can also be utilized for the welfare of suppressed section of the society. There is nothing bad in it; rather such utilization of money should be considered an act of virtue and peity."

The article written on the basis of examples from scriptures further annoyed Pandit Dulichand, Gaurang Sharma and Nalini Gour. The trio reached the office of 'Sainik' and went straight to Pandit Shriram Sharma and arrogantly said – "Have you studied scriptures at all or just cursorily scanned them?"

Shriram replied – "Respected Sirs! I have studied according to my wisdom and understanding. If I have committed any mistake, please tell me." Saying this he folded his hands in humility. The Pandits considered this gesture as their ridicule. They became more arrogant and said – "Young Pandit! Don't be so arrogant of your scholarship. If you are proud of knowledge, then do *Shastrartha* (debate on scriptures) with us; and prove your point in accordance with *shastras*."

Shriram got up from his seat and said – "I bow to your scholarship and age. I have no interest in *shastrartha*. I wrote whatever my prudence thought to be appropriate. If anyone feels it to be wrong, my apologies to them. I am not adamant about it."

Pandits thought that Shriram was shying away from *shastrartha;* his study was incomplete and hence fearing the defeat, he was not accepting the challenge. Considering this to be their victory, they burst into loud laughter; and went back arrogantly, as they had come. Paliwalji came to know of this incident. He said – "Shriram! Were you afraid of those people or didn't you have sufficient evidence in favour of what you have written?"

Shriram said – "There was neither fear nor dearth of evidences; but those people appeared to be fanatically stubborn. Any confrontation with them meant unnecessary tension. I felt they came only for quarreling. Therefore in order to avoid a worthless confrontation I begged their pardon."

Bapu's Example

Paliwalji praised his wisdom. Then he narrated a similar story of Mahatma Gandhi. In Allahabad, one Shastriji challenged him. He started arguing – "Will you make the lower caste people to wear *Yagyopaveet*; teach them *Japa* of *Sandhya - Gayatri*?

Bapu replied – "Every person, who has faith in *Veda* – *Shastra*s, has the right to wear *Yagyopaveet* and do *Japa* of *Sandhya - Gayatri*. If Harijans don't have the right of to wear *Yagyopaveet* and do *Sandhya - Gayatri*; then the people of other castes too don't need them." On this reply, Shastriji said with the intention of confrontation – "Do *Shastrartha.*" In order to avoid him, Gandhiji said – "There is no need of it. I accept my defeat in front of you." After narrating this incident, Paliwalji said – "Shriram! Like Bapu you have taken a wise step."

In that decade of the thirties, there was a boom of *Shastrarthas*. There used to be plenty of *Shastrarthas* between the scholars of Sanatan Dharma and Arya Samaj. The progressive explanation of the religion and tradition that was given by Swami Dayanand on the basis of Vedas, annoyed the orthodox people. Such people tried to bind Sanatan Dharma in a narrow definition that was based mainly on traditions and foolish assumptions. In fact Sanatan Dharma, in its original form, is quite inclusive and generous. The truth of the Vedas, sayings of great men and scholars and last but not the least whatever spark of thought is generated in the pure mind of a *Sadhak* are considered valid in the exposition of Sanatan Dharma.

The people, whose selfish interests were hurt by the religious revolution of Arya Samaj, made a narrow definition of Sanatan Dharma simply to protect their self interests. Whenever the rounds of arguments, debate or confrontation took place between them and the volunteers - scholars of Arya Samaj, there was never any consensus. Instead, the agitating scenes of heated dispute and conflict were enacted.

Foolish Conditions

Several times the conditions to be met for winning / losing a *Shastrartha* used to be foolish. For example, once there was *Shastrartha* between Mahatma Vedbhikshu and Pandit Jagannath in Banaras. It was decided that the loser would have to shave his head and, keeping the scriptures involved in the debate on his head, go to Ganga barefooted. So far it was tolerable. There was another incident in which two scholars of Allahabad were to engage themselves in *Shastrartha* with the condition that the winner would be entitled to marry the daughter of the loser. Both were married and were almost of the same age. Whoever would have won, he would have to marry the daughter of the opponent. This was equivalent to marrying one's own daughter! When this condition became publicly known, the religious leaders interrupted and prevented this debate from being held. In Avantika, the condition of *Shastrartha* was that the winner would strike the deity / scripture of the opponent by shoes. The topic of *Shastrartha* was 'idol–worship'. Sanatan scholar was a devotee of Lord Shiva. Had he lost he would have to go to the Shiva temple and declare his defeat. In the event of Arya Samaj scholar losing the battle, the same treatment was to be given to Vedas.

At some point of time, the aim of *Shastrartha* would have been genuine. In order to understand the meaning of a scripture, two or more scholars would come on the stage. There used to be intellectually enlightening debate among them, which cleared the understanding of participating people. This process became intense after the rise of Swami Dayanand; but it continued properly only for a few decades. Later on it became quarrelsome and genuine scholars stopped participating. The answers given in response to the objections on the program for Harijan upliftment in the form of an article in 'Sainik' were in the form of that kind of healthy debate. The challenge given by Pandits to Shriram was the ugly side of *Shastrartha.* Next day they sent a message that Shriram should declare himself defeated in the newspaper. Shriram refused to oblige. He sent a reply that he never accepted the challenge and hence there was no question of winning or losing. They wrote three – four letters and each time the reply was sent in the same tone. Finally they got a pamphlet printed and distributed from their side.

Shriram neither replied to it nor expressed any reaction to it in the newspaper or through a separate pamphlet.

Disintegration of Theosophical Society

It was hardly one year since the passing away of Dr. Annie Besant that her institution – the Theosophical Society started disintegrating. The way she had wholeheartedly imbibed Indian religion or the Sanantan Dharma, no one could challenge her. At that time two powerful currents of religious revival were busy cleansing the dirt and debris of Sanatan Dharma – first Theosophical Society and second Arya Samaj. But thealternate definitions of Indian culture and spirituality that they were propagating didn't encompass the total ethos, insights and perennial message of Indian heritage. Both the movements considered *Veda – Vedang* as the original source of Indian religion, but neither of them gave recognition to Avatarhood, idol - worship, devotion, polytheism, fasting etc. Both movements opposed casteism, superstition and outmoded customs. They supported women education and considered child marriage to be antireligious. With thesehealthy reformations, they also committed one excess. That excess was in the form of limiting the horizon of Sanatan Dharma. Theosophical Society was a movement restricted to scholars. It had no understanding of the collective psyche of the masses. Arya Samaj did touch the society extensively.

Commenting on the philosophies of Arya Samaj and Theosophical Society, Pandit Sripad Joshi had written – "The refined form of Theosophical Society appeared as if Sanatan Dharma was an Indian version of Christianity. In the same way, Arya Samaj too appeared to be very different from prevalent Hinduism. It is the brave arm and bold face of Indian religion, but it is not complete in itself." Sanatan Dharma that Dr. Annie Besant supported was essentially an exponent of Hinduism in its entirety. The discourses on *yoga, bhakti, anushthan, avatar, puja*, rebirth, etc from the mouth of a British woman surprised not only the Indian scholars but also the western scholars. That also restored the faith of many Indians in their hoary religion.

Dr Annie Besant was a famous scholar and an impressive speaker. She belonged to a very noble family. Prior to coming to India, she worked for the Fabian Society – a British socialist movement. Authors like George Bernard Shaw were her colleagues. She had extraordinary command over English. Bernard Shaw once wrote that there was no person in England comparable to her in delivering a poetic speech. In fact, there was no speaker comparable to her in the whole of Europe. She was of the view that India possessed enough wealth of spirituality (in the form of principles of Sanatan Dharma) that could be shared with the rest of the world. Once she said – "Sanatan Dharma is under the clouds of extremism. It is the Indians who can take up the *anushthan* of dispersing these clouds." At her level, she also tried to conduct an experiment, but it failed badly. This failure led to disintegration of the Theosophical Society. Due to the shock of this disintegration and also due to her old age, she finally shed her physical form in 1933.

The Successors of Dr. Annie Besant

Dr. Annie Besant expired but the controversy that was generated in her time still persisted. A branch of Theosophical Society was opened in Agra and there also reverberated the echo of that controversy. Shriram was very much familiar with Theosophical Society. The activities of Theosophy movement were not very visible as this was not an active organization. Shriram agreed with its philosophy but, from the point of view of activities, he was more near to Arya Samaj. In politics, he was on the platform of Congress; and in the cultural field, he was on the platform of Arya Samaj. In 1934, theosophists became active in Agra. Earlier too there were a few members of this society, but after the death of Annie Besant, they started expanding the work.

A *Sadhak* named Pandit Anant Narayan Jutsi took charge of Theosophical Society in Agra. He organized a festival in September, 1934. Probably it was the period of *Ashvin Navratri.* It was a *Sadhana - shivir* (camp) of four days. Twelve *Sadhaks* participated in it. Apart from *Dhyan - Dharna*, there used to be *Pravachans* also in the afternoon and evening. Jutsiji persuaded Shriram to participate in the camp. Through discussions and discourses, Shriram got acquainted with the thoughts and beliefs of the Theosophical Society. In this interaction, the causes of disintegration of the society were also made known to him.

Selection for Specific Experiments

The controversy that hurt Theosophical movement was concerned with a brilliant youth named J. Krishnamurthy. Due to some inborn virtues in Krishnamurthy (born in Madanpalli, Chittoor, Tamilnadu), Annie Besant and her colleague C. W. Leadbeater, took him under their protection. They had already taken Krishnamurthy's elder brother earlier under their protection, but their hope rested more on Krishnamurthy.

Annie Besant believed that if some specific orientation / training were given to this child, he could become a messiah for propagating the message of spirituality to the world. She arranged the best possible education for Krishnamurthy. She took him abroad and kept him in the proximity of *sadhaks* of Theosophy in London. Full attention was paid to him in terms of food, living, learning environment and culture. This preparation was done for about fifteen years. Annie Besant also gave some lectures on the mission and purpose of birth of Krishnamurthy. The essence of those lectures was that Lord Buddha, prior to his *Mahanirvan*, had promised his disciples that he would take birth once more; and after 2500 years, his consciousness would make someone his vehicle. At that time, he would again show the correct path to the way–lost humanity. In 1926-27, Annie Besant made a tour of several places in Britain and America and kept Krishnamurthy with him. In the public meetings, she would introduce him and say that once again Lord Buddha would give his message to humanity through this youth.

In those meetings, Krishnamurthy also used to speak. His lectures used to be centered around two themes – '*Appa dipo bhava*' (meaning: Be your own source of light) and '*Sarvam dukham dukham*' (meaning: There is pain and sorrow everywhere). After addressing several meetings, for almost two years, in Britain, America, France, Itali, Japan, etc, Annie Besant returned to India. Krishnamurthy was also called back. As soon as he returned to India, there arose a controversy. His parents asserted their right over their son. Earlier also they were doing so, but as Krishnamurthy was living abroad, no legal action could be taken. In 1927, as soon as he returned to India, they filed a case against Theosophical Society (TS) in Madras High Court. They charged, 'Annie Besant and Leadbeater kidnapped their son in the childhood; they enticed the child, frightened him and brought him up in a different culture.'

The case was fought for a long time. During the trial, several types of charges were labeled which hurt Annie Besant deeply. For a person, who was President of 'Indian Home Rule League' – a socio-political organization, the charge of kidnapping a boy itself was a source of unbearable hurt. Apart from that, the charge of destroying the character of the child shook her still more deeply.

Krishnamurthy's Frankness

A situation came during the hearing when there was need of Krishnamurthy's testimony. At that time, he was a young man of thirty two; and due to his association with TS, he was commanding a great respect. In his statement, Krishanmurthy declared himself to be separate from both – his biological family and the TS. He didn't complain against anyone; he also didn't show any attachment to either. The end of the legal proceedings was strange. The verdict didn't go in anybody's favour. But Annie Besant could not bear the shock. She fell sick; and after a prolonged illness passed away in 1933.

This controversy was also a matter of discussion in the *Sadhana- Shivir* organized in Agra. People expressed their sympathy towards Annie Besant and Leadbeater. According to them, whatever spiritual awakening had occurred within Krishanmurthy was due only to the efforts of those two pioneer theosophists. He should not have left TS. Instead, he should have expressed his gratitude. It would have been still better if he had remained in the same movement and given it a new direction.

Where was the Lapse?

It was the third day of the *shivir. Sadhaks* were talking that Krishnamurthy had set up his own organization and that he would work independently. Like everyday, that day also Shriram got up at 3

AM and was engaged in *Japa-Dhyan*. By the time Dhyan was complete, there was some spark of realization. This was related to the discussions at TS camp. By 7:30 AM he was ready and arrived in the *shivir* to participate in the collective *sadhana*. The topic of the day was – 'Invisible guidance available in the path of spirituality.' The invited guest to speak on this topic was Swami Nikhilanand. Swamiji had his own Ashram. He was very much influenced by the philosophy of TS.

Beginning his *Pravachan* (discourse) he said – "It is enough even to resolve to move onto the path of *sadhana*. After taking the resolve, the liberated souls rush to *sadhak* for help. As the evil spirits push a person onto the path of decline; in the same way elevated spirits intensify the desire for salvation in resolute *sadhaks*." As soon as the *Pravachan* ended, a *sadhak* named Yogendra Mathur asked a question – "Swamiji! If the liberated spirits help, then they must also be looking after the *sadhaks* very well.

Swamiji said – 'Certainly' Then the next question of Mathur was – 'If this is true, then why Krishnamurthy deviated from the group in which he grew up?"

Swamiji had no answer to this question. He was taken aback. Then he composed himself and said honestly – "I have no answer to this question. If any one of you wants to say something, he is most welcome." *Sadhaks* were looking at one another; but no one had the answer to this question. Shriram raised his hand and after getting the green signal from Swamiji got up. He started saying – "Resolve alone is not enough. It requires *sadhana* too. Without this, what to talk of invisible spirits, even God is unable to help. In bringing up Krishnamurthy, there was one lapse on the part of the great Annie Besant and other *siddha* scholars. That lapse was that they themselves did the *sadhana* that was to be done by Krishanmurthy. This raised the level of Krishnamurthy but he could not assimilate the energy of *sadhana*. Therefore, when the responsibility of spiritual growth of others was to be entrusted to Krishnamurthy, he deviated from it. He refused to take the responsibility."

Swami Nikhilanand felt that Shriram was giving the answer from his experience or inner vision. He asked – "Is it true that the consciousness of Lord Buddha was to descend in his personality?" Shriram said – "Certainly, because the great adepts of theosophical occultism like Annie Besant and others were working hard on his spiritual growth for sixteen years. This endeavor was to make Krishnamurthy a fit medium for that descent." Swamiji asked – "Then where was the lapse? Why didn't the spirit of Buddha descend in him?"

"Because, Krishnamurthy didn't prepare himself for it. Had this preparation got done by him, then the experiment of Annie Besant would have been successful." – Said Shriram. After a pause, he again said – "But that possibility is not altogether ruled out. That is still valid. The consciousness of Buddha will make someone else his medium."

"Can you tell me when would that right moment arrive? Will we be the witness to that incident?" asked Swamiji. Shriram said – "If one opportunity is lost, then second should come quickly. In fact, this is the right time. I cannot say which body Tathagat would use as his medium, but it is also possible that he may do so in the near future. That medium will not need any evidence / proof. The world will automatically recognize him."

The meetings of Theosophical Society (TS)

The weekly routine of study classes and meditation of TS was running smoothly. Every Sunday, *sadhaks* would gather at the residence of Jutsiji and discuss topics of philosophical interest. The essence of whatever was studied by the *sadhaks* individually on a specific topic in a week was shared with others in the weekly meeting. Once in a while there would be discussion on the current events. *Sadhaks* avoided talking about worldly matters and totally avoided talking politics. The weekly study class and meditation became almost regular in a short time. Later on this weekly program was conducted at the residence of other *sadhaks* also. Two such classes were held at the residence of Shriram. He liked all aspects of TS but didn't like its avoiding any interest in political events. He considered this to be shirking from responsibility. Once in a while, he tried to discuss the prevailing political situation in the country, but the volunteers of TS showed no interest.

It would have been understandable, had the members of TS not discussed such matters; but they were not ready even to listen. Once Shriram said firmly – "We avoid talking about the present and the future of our country. Why we forget that the founder of TS herself was a political activist who inspired thousands of people to be proud of our country and the culture."

A *sadhak* named Buddhi Vallabh opposed this view. He said –"Madam was capable of doing all that. Our power is limited. We cannot do all that." Another member said – "We are *sadhaks*; we gather here for *sadhana*. We cannot discuss any politics here."
Shriram said – "Whatever lakhs of revolutionaries are doing, is not a low-level politics. It is a struggle for regaining our lost dignity."

The local head of TS, Jutsi, said – "It would be better Shriram if you also avoid talking such things; and concentrate on your spiritual development. The patriotic activities of Dr. Annie Besant are indeed worth following, but we are not capable of it."

Opposition

Shriram was not expecting this answer. He got up and said – "We believe that spirits of seers living in the secret regions of Himalayas help us in every step. In spite of this faith, we are so weak. I feel that our faith itself is weak". After a pause he said – "Without independence, no spiritual growth is possible. It achievement requires courage and resolute efforts; but what I am feeling is that we are trying to avoid even talking about it."

"Then what should be done?" – said Jutsiji. Shriram replied – 'I cannot be a member of such a weak community"; and he got out of the hall without even bothering to know the reaction of other members.

Disagreement with Mahatma Gandhi

Even after the end of the year 1934, Mahatma Gandhi didn't become as active in politics as he used to be earlier. In fact he ceased to be a formal volunteer of Congress. That year Gandhiji had done mass awakening for Harijan upliftment. Then he started talking about village upliftment. He asked the volunteers to work with *Charkha* (spinning wheel). His plea was, "Without the upliftment of villages, independence cannot be meaningful; those who wish to achieve full freedom should adopt *Charkha*". Gandhiji asked three years time for the popularization of *Charkha* and related village industries. In October 1934, in the

Bombay Session of Congress, Gandhiji's proposal was accepted. The resolution of the establishment of 'Gramodyoga Sangh' was also passed. Though the resolution was passed, but many volunteers of the Congress were unhappy with this decision. They ridiculed Gandhiji and said with this pace it would take at least hundred years to attain freedom.

In 'Sainik' newspaper, Shriram too published a comment. He wrote – "Efforts for village upliftment should be done, but we should remain in active politics. If Gandhiji is keeping aloof for three years, thousands of youth will be disappointed. Bapu should, at least, inspire these youths to remain in politics."

Shriram himself didn't take partial or full time renunciation from politics. He was working in his own way to give speed to the movement. There was negative reaction to the comments in 'Sainik' on Gandhiji's keeping away from active politics for three years. In fact, the volunteers were getting tired and they wanted to devote some time to reorganize their disturbed or ruined business. This declaration of Gandhiji was proving to be a boon for them. They were perturbed by the comments in 'Sainik' and wrote – "Is this newspaper – dedicated to the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi – changing its direction?" Paliwalji too expressed almost a similar reaction. Shriram replied – "My reverence for Gandhiji has not diminished at all, but slackness may creep in the freedom movement by this decision. It was essential to underline this point."

Paliwalji asked –"Didn't Bapu think about that aspect? He takes any decision only after closely scrutinizing all the aspects."
Shriram said – "It's alright; but why should we neglect other aspects? If this assessment proves to be wrong, I will accept my mistake. I have no objection to it." Shriram knew that Paliwalji revered Mahatma

Gandhi and that the points raised by him may appear bitter to him, but he stuck to his point fearlessly. Paliwalji patted his back and said – "We too should plan about the village upliftment. Think about it and tell me."

Plan of Adopting the Village

There was no need for Shriram to think about it. He instantly replied as if he had already decided about it – "We should independently adopt one village and start two activities there: first, we should arrange for cleanliness of the village; and second, we should open one school there. Four-five volunteers should be sufficient for this purpose. Rest of the work can be taken care of by the local volunteers."

In these few sentences, grassroots level work of Bapu's village upliftment program was made clear. Paliwaliji was very happy to know about this plan. He said – 'Let us put forward this plan for approval in the next Sunday's meeting. What do you think?"

Shriram nodded his head in agreement. Even then the volunteers' anger due to his critical remarks on the decision of Mahatma Gandhi was not reduced. In that meeting members again protested vehemently. Paliwalji said – "The proposal of village upliftment that we are discussing has been suggested by Shriram himself. In spite of this, should we criticize him?"

Even after the persuasion of Paliwalji, some volunteers were still adamant and insisted that Shriram should apologize for his remarks and take his words back. The turn of Shriram came. As soon as he got up, some volunteers started making noise. Shriram spoke loudly – "Whatever I am going to speak, kindly listen to it patiently"

They thought that Shriram was perhaps relenting; he would accept his mistake and then apologize for it. When the subsided, Shriram said –"You may be correct, but I too have the right to express myself according to my understanding. If you don't want to give this much of freedom of expression, then I feel that the freedom for which we are fighting is nothing but a mirage. After removing the British, we want to impose our own dominion……" His talk was making impact. People were listening to him attentively. He concluded his talk in the following words – "Even now, if you want me to beg pardon, I do so; not for my comments – written or said, but for my association with a group that is not ready to tolerate even a little disagreement. I will leave the Congress, but will not submit to wrong pressure."

Senior volunteers like Paliwalji, Jagan Prasad Rawat, Gopal Pareek, etc were stunned. Paliwalji got up and said –"If Shriram leaves this movement, other volunteers will follow suit. Hence, we will place this point in front of Bapu." Members present there didn't expect this kind of answer and expression. They became silent.

Service of *Gram Devata*

There was a village called Karaval near Agra where hardly twenty – thirty families lived. Two families belonged to Brahmans and eight families belonged to Thakur community. The rest were from middle or backward classes. The total population was around two hundred fifty – three hundred. When, during a discussion with Paliwalji, Shriram was talking about adopting a village, he had this village in his mind. When the furore arising out of the remarks on Gandhiji's decision got subsided, a discussion on adopting the village was initiated. A call was given for five volunteers to come forward to take up the responsibility of upliftment of Karaval. There was pin-drop silence in the meeting, as if they had been bitten by a snake. Those who were arrogantly arguing over the remarks in 'Sainik' and trying to compel Shriram to apologize and take back his words – were also now keeping their mouths shut, as if they had no tongues.

Shriram said – "Four more volunteers are needed. Whether they are available or not, I will start my work from Deepawali" After this declaration, no one said anything. A volunteer named Kripanidhi said –"How can you mange alone the entire village?"

Paliwalji responded – "Some people should come forward to give him company. I believe, Shriram will be able to spare time for Karaval apart from his present responsibilities."

'Yes, Yes' – Shriram gave weight to Paliwalji's talk and said further – "Apart from working for the newspaper, public meetings, freedom struggle and other tasks, I will devote three hours daily in Karaval. Though this time is insufficient, but I will prepare some local volunteers from the village itself."

"This will be alright." – Said Kripanidhi – "The volunteers should be trained from the village itself. I too am ready to devote three hours daily with Shriram. I should be able to spare that much time."
"Then what will happen to your shop?" - Asked Shriram humorously – "You will remember your shop while cleaning or teaching." The purpose of this question was also to know the alternate arrangements made at home while sparing time for village service. Carrying forward his talk, he again said - "After reaching the village, if you start remembering your shop and business, then your workload will also fall on my head."

Kripanidhi said – “No Baba! No! I will ask my elder son to take care the business and I will accompany you. If time permits, I can even remain there for the whole day.”

Welcome in the Village

Shriram started his work earlier than the set day of Deepawali. Karaval was about two and a half miles from Agra. Now it has become a part of Agra city, but at that time there was no proper approach road to the village. Shriram and Kripanidhi began their journey to Karaval on bicycles at 6 AM. Pleasant winter had started. It used to be dark even at 6 AM. So in order to be ready by that time, they had to get up early. Shriram had a habit of getting up at 3 AM, but Kripanidhi had to be awakened on the first day. In a few days he also got habituated to getting up early.

On the first day, it took about half an hour to reach Karaval. After reaching the village, they knocked at the door of Thakur Mahan Singh. He knew Shriram very well. So he welcomed them and requested them to sit on the cot. He asked his wife to bring *roli –chaval* (red powder and rice grains for applying on the forehead). Shriram said – ‘Why all this?’ ‘Right in the morning *Brahman Devata* has arrived in my home and that too a *rishi* like you. Let me thank my fortune.’ – Said the Thakur.

In the meantime, Thakurain (Thakur’s wife) came with the items for welcome. Both of them touched the feet of Brahman guest and applied *roli –chaval* on his forehead. After the pleasantries were over, Shriram came straight to the point and said – “We have come here to begin the first phase of Gandhiji’s social upliftment movement. In first phase, we have to make our village neat and clean. After that we will think of starting a school and some cottage industries here."

"What is the big problem in making the village neat and clean? - Said Thakur – "Just now I will summon the sweepers of the village. Within two days, the whole village will have a clean look. Anyway, is any big shot coming to our village?"

'No" – replied Shriram. He further added – "Taking the help of sweepers or other people for cleaning the village is a outmoded custom. Bapu's message is that every resident of the village should feel the responsibility of keeping it clean. For this purpose, we have to initiate the process today itself and right now."

Begin with the Self

It was felt more appropriate to begin with the work instead of calling the meeting of villagers and then explaining them the need for cleaning, etc. Shriram asked Thakur to provide two brooms and baskets. As soon as he started going out with these, Thakur said – "Where are you going *Devata* with these items?"

"For cleaning the village; those who love their village should accompany me." – Saying this Shriram went out of the *Haveli*. He handed over one broom to Kripanidhi and took the other one in his hand. He kept the baskets on the *Chabootara* (an open raised area). He put his *gamachha* (thin towel), hanging on his shoulder, on his head and folded it around the neck in a way so that dust should not go inside the nose and mouth. Kripanidhi also followed suit. After this preparation, they started their work.

They started sweeping from the left corner of the Haveli. Thakur and his wife also came out to see what was happening. When they saw Shriram sweeping the road, they ran inside and Thakur came out with a broom. He started sweeping in front of his Haveli. Shriram came near him and said – "I knew that you will cooperate with me. That is why we left the road in front of the Haveli and began our work from the corner." Listening this, Thakur's face glittered with enthusiasm.

The news, that two strangers from Agra and Thakur Sahib were sweeping the road, spread like wildfire. This was the eighth wonder for the villagers. He was the same Thakur who was feared so much that people of backward class didn't cross the road, wearing shoes, in front of his Haveli as it would have made the road dirty. The same fellow was doing the cleaning. People came out from their homes to see him, but stopped at the corner of the Haveli. Thinking that Thakur might consider watching him cleaning below his dignity, the villagers began looking at other houses. They were also looking at one another in wonderment.

Against this background of amazement and quizzical looks, the thunderous voice of the Thakur was heard – "What are you looking at from the corner? O Ganapatia! Bring broom and basket. Start cleaning and also ask others to do the same. After the entire village is cleaned, all of us will meet in the temple."

Emphasis on the Cleaning of *Gram Mandir*

This voice of Thakur also reached the ears of Shriram. He looked at Kripanidhi. Kripanidhi too glanced at him. He was happy and his eyes had the expression of praise for Shriram. The village was quite small. It took hardly one hour to clean the roads. After sweeping, the whole ambiance of the village got polished. By the order of the Thakur, all the villagers gathered at the temple. They were all dirtied by sweepings. Shriram began addressing the gathering. . He said – "Village is also a *Mandir* (Temple) of God. The village is the extension of the compound of the temple of God. It is the responsibility of all of us to keep it neat and clean. Whatever work we have done today, that must be done everyday. Then only will God be happy. The village should be cleaned every day, as we clean the temple."

Kripanidhi asked, out of curiosity, "By cleaning the temple, God gets pleased and grants boons. What will we get by cleaning the village?"

"Diseases will not spread in the village. Residents will keep healthy. This way their minds will remain cheerful and intellect will become pure." – Shriram narrated the benefits of cleanliness.

Next day they undertook the task of making drains outside the houses. The villagers were told that they should not throw the water left after washing, etc on the road; that they should fix one place for washing utensils, etc and make a hole to connect it to the drain. It took hardly a week to make the drains. Shriram also taught them how to fix a row of bricks after digging the drain.

In order to superintend, Shriram would remain in Karaval uptill 9:30 AM. It took hardly two weeks to impart lessons of cleanliness and proper management of the village. Thakur Sahib himself was taking keen interest in this work. Due to his presence, other people also joined this endeavor. Later on this became their daily routine. They considered it their responsibility to clean the road in front of their homes and their backyards.

Forthcoming Announcement

One day prior to Deepawali, Shriram stayed for a full day at Karaval. The village got spruced up within just two weeks. Shriram told Thakur Sahib – "This time we will celebrate our Deepawali at your home. It will be good if you send the gift of sweets to all the villagers. At the end of *Puja* (worship) in the evening, we are also planning to make one announcement"

"What is the subject of announcement?' –asked Thakur Sahib. "We will make the announcement at that time only. But don't worry; only you have to take its responsibility." – replied Shriram. In fact Thakur became anxious on hearing about it. He pleaded - "Tell me now, please tell me."

In a manner of teasing, Shriram started laughing. In the evening, when he was returning home with Kripanidhi, latter also raised the subject of curiosity of Thakur. Shriram said – "We will ask Thakur to arrange for rooms so that we can run a school there. The children of the village can study there."

Companion in 'Sainik'

At that time, there were about four to five workers in the office of 'Sainik' newspaper. Shriram shared the responsibility of writing the news from radio, editing it, sending it for composing and then proofreading it. There was one more helper for this work. His name was Shiromaniji. Earlier he used to work in 'Sahitya Sandesh' newspaper. The paper was not able even to earn its running expenses. Paliwalji brought him to 'Sainik' by saying that he could satisfy his literary interests here. After the joining of Shiromaniji, the load of work on Shriram was reduced a bit.

After adopting Karaval and initiating the developmental activities there, Shriram used to devote most of his time to the newspaper. Once in a while he would go to Aanwalkheda or his wife would come to Agra and stay with him for sometime. Son Omprakash was about 5-6 years old and so he would also accompany his mother to Agra. Shriram's daily routine was well organized for some months. He would reach his office at about 10 AM and going through the mail, etc begin editing the news.

Shriram himself used to listen to the noon and evening news bulletins. He would note them and would make a copy of the news for his own paper. The news that was broadcast on the radio was available to the people in the paper on the next day. Of course, those news items were slightly altered according to the policy of the paper. Shriram used to write very fast; probably faster than a stenographer. His writing was also legible and beautiful. Later on due to the practice of writing very fast, his writing became illegible but that was about thirty – thirty five years later.

Being a fast writer, Babu Gulab Rai used to call Shriram from time to time. Due to his old age, Gulab Rai had difficulty in writing by hand. On his call, Shriram started going there as if he were Gulab Rai's stenographer. One of the reasons of going there was his devotion as a student. He thought that in the company of Gulab Rai he would learn some new things and his skills would be further honed. He started going once or twice in a week. While returning, he would very often bring some article, comments or reaction for the 'Sainik' paper. The comments of Babu Gulab Rai centered mainly on social and cultural topics.

An Interesting Incident in 'Sainik' Office

Sometimes in the office of 'Sainik', interesting events would happen around Shriram. Whenever his son Omprakash would visit Agra, some or the other person would take him to the office of 'Sainik'. Omprakash would play in his own way. There were no toys in the office of 'Sainik'. So a child of 5-6 years had to play with bundles of newspapers, ruler or pen and paper. A radio set was kept on a stool near the table of Shriram. The size of this set was quite big – about two and half feet. When the news was to be heard, it was switched on. Its sound was quite loud. Whenever the radio set was switched on, Omprakash would be delighted. He would run towards the radio and would try to investigate from where the sound was coming. In the absence of his father, sometimes he would climb to the table top, see behind the radio and would get impatient to see the person whose voice was heard in the radio.

After a few minutes, when Shriram would return to his table, he would smile at the activities of Omprakash. He would make his son come down from the table and would again get busy with his work as if he had no tickling effect of his son's activities. His son too would get busy in other activities. Another person, coming from his village, too tried to enquire about the functioning of the radio. Shriram tried to explain him but all he could understand was that by simply turning round the knob, the radio would start working.

After sometime, when Shriram got up from his seat and went to the press, that man tried to operate the radio. He turned round the knob. No sound was heard from the radio as it was not the time of a broadcast. After repeatedly turning the knob and not hearing any voice, he forced the knob. The knob came in his hand. He thought something had gone wrong. He kept the knob on Shriram's table and slipped away from the office. When Shriram returned to his seat, there was no one there but he could guess easily what had happened when he noticed the knob on his table. Without feeling irritated, Shriram tried to fix it. When he didn't succeed, he asked his co-worker to call the mechanic and calmly got engaged in his work.

Uncle's Complaint

Taiji never visited Shriram during his stay at Agra. She continued sticking to the village. According to her capacity, she would take care of the family and the farms. It was Shriram who would visit the village from time to time and meet her. Once, some three – four old neighbors of the village home caught hold of Shriram. One of them was his near relative – *Chacha* (uncle). He used to get irritated when he saw Taiji (his *bhabhi* brother's wife) getting entangled in household and agricultural work.

The thought of admonishing Shriram came in his mind. By that time Taiji had become grandmother of one more grand-daughter. Shriram had named her Shraddha. The complaint of *Chacha* was that in spite of becoming father of three children, Shriram was not trying to realize the familial responsibilities; and remained wholly occupied with the activities of the freedom movement. Thus when Shriram visited the village, *Chacha* had made up his mind to chastise Shriram and bring him onto the right path. For this purpose, he had also called his friends for help.

Chacha and his friends started questioning Shriram. *Chacha* asked – “By working for a newspaper, a person becomes a great man. Is it?”

“It is not so.” – Said Shriram – “But what do you want to say?”

“I wish to say nothing. I am only interested in knowing what you are gaining by publishing the newspaper, or keeping the company of political leaders.’ – *Chacha* made it clear. Shriram understood his point, but was unable to guess what exactly he wanted. Without indulging in arguments, he said – “*Chachaji*! Don’t quizz me. Please order me. I will obey your command.”

“We want to convey you that you are the eldest male member of your home. When Panditji (Shriram’s father) was alive, your mother never crossed the door of the *Haveli*. Even now she doesn’t go out. There is no one to look after the home and agricultural lands. It is your duty to come out of this political maze, take up your family responsibilities and reduce her burden. – Said *Chacha’s* friend. *Chacha* too agreed. After a pause, Shriram replied – “But whatever I am doing, I am doing with the permission of my mother. It is with her blessings that I have adopted the path of service to the nation.”

“You might have insisted and hence *Bhabhi* (Taiji) would have said ‘yes’ to gratify you. Just imagine, which mother would like to keep her son away from her?” – *Chacha* said – “Then also think how long can she look after your wife and children? Should you not take care of your aging mother instead?” Shriram had no answer for this question. The talks continued for sometime. Shriram was trying in vain to convince others that whatever he was doing was being done with the permission of his mother. Ultimately, all the five people agreed to go to Taiji for the final verdict.

Dakshina Alongwith *Daan*

All the four made Shriram agree to insist on staying with Taiji. If Taiji agreed to the proposal gladly, then it would be considered that she permitted superficially for becoming a freedom fighter; otherwise, it would be considered that she had really dedicated her son wholeheartedly to the nation.

All of them went together to Taiji. According to the promise, Shriram said – “Mother! I have done enough service to the nation. Now I wish to stay at home and serve you. Now I will not return to Agra.” Hearing this Taiji first looked at Shriram and then at other persons. Then she said - “Very well! What drama do you want to enact; and Ramkishore Bahiya (*Chacha*), why are you pressurizing my son?”

“No *Bhabhi*”, said *Chacha* – “I am not putting any pressure. It is Shriram who asked me to accompany him.”

Taiji didn’t care to listen. She said, laying emphasis on each and every word – “When someone gives something in *Daan* (donation), then that is also accompanied by *Dakshina* (gift). He does not take back the item / money given in *Daan*. I have donated my son to the society. I will not take him back at any cost. Now regarding *Dakshina* also I have made up my mind.”

All the five were stunned on listening to the resolve of Taiji. They could not clearly understand about *Dakshina*. They were eager to listen to something new. So *Chachaji* asked –”What have you thought about *Dakshina*, Bhabhi?”

"I will give this land and property as *Dakshina* to society. Whenever Shriram wishes, he can use it for this purpose." – Said Taiji. The people present there were taken aback. They couldn't speak anything. They realized their mistake and felt that in an attempt to call back Shriram, the family Haveli, land and property were also going to be given away. Taiji didn't stop there to know their reactions. Immediately, she went inside the house. Shriram's face was glittered with pride and joy. Stunned uncle could only say – "You are truly great *Bhabhjii*. You have honored our family and the village."

Independence Appeared Certain

The year 1935 and two years following this were the turning point in the history of freedom struggle. The British Parliament passed a new legislation for India in 1935. It outlined a plan to give freedom to India in steps. This was an important step in the direction of achieving freedom. Analysts considered it to be a significant success in the freedom struggle. In the new legislation, the Viceroy and Provincial Governors were given unlimited powers. In that context, the Indian society didn't see this as a great success. However, in the legislation elected the representatives of people were also given some powers.

Initially, the Congress – the prominent political party, flatly refused to accept this legislation. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru called it a warrant of slavery. He said, "This law gives Indians responsibilities but no rights." According to the new legislation, when the turn of holding the elections for the provincial legislative assemblies came, the majority of congress men were not in favor of taking part in them. Even then, the government was bent upon holding the elections. There was much discussion on whether to take part in elections or not. Ultimately, the leadership decided that they should certainly express their disapproval of the legislation but should take part in the elections. If they didn't participate then the assemblies might be occupied by such persons who could drag the nation in any direction; and that could be suicidal.

Elections were held. When the results were declared in February 1937, Congress won clear majority in *Sanyukta Prant* (now U. P.), Bihar, Madhya Bharat and Madras Presidency. It could win only half the seats in Bombay Presidency and with like-minded parties, it was in a position to form a government there, too. In North – West Frontier Province (now in Pakistan) and Assam, it emerged as the largest party.

As Congress was against new legislation, there was dilemma whether to make governments in provinces or not. Within the scope of the law, provincial governments had no powers; all the powers were given either to the Viceroy or to the Governors. There was deep discussion on this topic in Congress. Those days Mahatma Gandhi was keeping himself away from active politics. Even then, he used to express his opinions. Congress leaders too very often used to visit him to get his guidance.

Governments Formed in States

Mahatma Gandhi relieved the Congress from dilemma and suggested – "Congress should go to the assemblies. Despite no powers under the new legislation, Congress can do a lot. It is getting an opportunity to give momentum to the constructive programs as well as to set before the people an example of good governance. This opportunity must not be missed. In their own provinces, the Congress ministries can encourage *Gramodyog*, implement prohibition of liquor, encourage *Khadi* and *Swadeshi*, reduce the burden of debts from farmers, initiate efforts in the direction of eradication of untouchability, etc. At least, they can prepare the atmosphere for such reforms." Keeping in mind

Bapu's suggestions and the prevailing political equations, the Congress formed governments in Bombay, Sanyukta Prant, Bihar, Madhya Prant, Orissa, Madras and NWF Province.

On the surface it appeared that the political party that was bent upon uprooting the British from India agreed to make governments under its rule. However, it was not actually so. Congress started supporting constructive activities. The ministers imbibed the discipline suggested by Gandhiji. The latter suggested that the ministers should adopt a simple living like that of an average Indian. He laid special emphasis on spread of education and prohibition of liquor.

Shriram used to write in the 'Sainik' about these political events in independent, impartial and clear way. At that time, the political leaders became lax as they were almost certain about getting independence. Shriram, in his editorials, sometimes mentioned this attitude of volunteers as 'laxity' and asked them to remain alert. Though he was active as a political journalist and a freedom fighter as usual, for sometime, he used to feel uneasiness from within. Suddenly he would become quiet. While sleeping at night, he would wake up suddenly; and sitting on the bed start contemplating something. His wife, finding him awake, would also get up; and serve him a glass of water and request him to sleep. Shriram would agree hesitantly to her suggestion and would try to sleep. Some deep churning was going on in his inner being. What was the matter? No one knew. There was no process at the level of thought or implementation; only the waves of emotions were coming and going.

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Another Pilgrimage to the South

It was some date of June 1937. As usual Shriram got up at 3 AM. After daily chores, he sat down for his regular worship. As soon as *Japa* and *Dhyan* were complete, the same dilemma overpowered him. He concentrated on the flame of *Akhand Deepak* and even before he could realize, he entered into a trance. This condition prevailed for a long time. Shriram could recollect that his wife awakened him by shaking him vigorously. It appeared as if his sleep had been disturbed. When he was awakened, he found himself sitting on the *asan* (mat) in *Puja* –room. He could recall the scenes in the trance before he became normal. Now there was no dilemma, uncertainty or doubt in the mind. It became clear what was to be done next.

He folded his *asan*. Wife asked -"Should I bring buttermilk?" As compared to other days, it was too late. Normally Shriram used to take buttermilk two hours after *Japa-Dhyan*. That day he sat for a long time. Shriram told her to wait for sometime. Then he started looking at his collection of books. He took out a copy of Swetashwar Upnishad and began turning the pages. His eyes got stuck on a particular topic. After quite some time, he wrote in his diary that he read that Upnishad in just one sitting. The peace that followed *Japa-Dhyan* was intact; but it got its manifestation in the Upnishad.

After reading the Upnishad, he asked his wife to bring his breakfast (buttermilk). After that he said – 'Daya'. His daughter's name was Daya. In those days, in elite families of North India, wife was not called by her name. Saraswati Devi started looking at him. Seeing her enthusiastic to hear, Shriram said – 'We will go to the village today. You can stay there. I am going on a tour of South India for few days'. Wife started packing to go home. Same day he left his family in Aanwalkheda and started preparing for his journey to South India. The urge came from within that he should begin his tour from Puri; and then go to Pondicherry via Tirupati and Kanchipuram. There would be no stoppages at the towns or other *teerths* (holy places) coming in-between. This journey was to be completed in three weeks. With adequate preparations, the journey commenced.

Unique Jagannath Puri

In Puri, he visited almost all important holy places. He paid special attention on Jagannath temple and Shankar *Matha* (temple). It is well known that Puri's temple is more than eight hundred years old. The king Anang Bhimsen, in order to save himself from the sin of *Brahmahatya* (killing of a *Brahman*), built this temple. Later on other kings, *samantas*, *Jagirdars*, etc contributed something or the other to augment its beauty and grandeur. When Shriram visited Puri, preparations of '*Nav Kalevar*' festival were in full swing. The idols placed in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple were not made of metal or clay, but were carved out of wood. This wood was collected from sea. There is belief that well before '*Kalevar Utsav*', the stem of *Brahmadaru* tree starts floating on sea waters. On a set auspicious date and time, idols (head and torso) of Balram, Subhadra and Jagannath (Krishna) are carved out of that wood.

Shriram was fascinated by the tradition and grandeur of Jagannath, He liked very much the arrangement of serving *Prasad* (food). Everyone gets *Puja – Prasad* of Jagannath without any distinction of caste, creed, etc. In those days (1936-37) when the people of lower castes were not even allowed to enter the temples in other places, the tradition of allowing the *Harijans* for *Darshan* (view of the idols) and take *Prasad* along with the people of upper castes, made one really ecstatic. This tradition was an ideal example for the volunteers or scholars who were votaries of healthy traditions / customs in the society.

The Plight of *Matha*

After visiting Gundicha temple and Kapalmochan, Shriram went to Shankaracharya *Matha*. One can reach this *Matha* from Puri temple by moving some distance towards the sea shore and then turning right. In ancient times, the *Matha* had attained great name and fame. Even the people who have general interest in ancient culture, know that out of the four *Mathas* that Adi Shankar established, the place of *Govardhan Peeth* (at Puri) was unique. Shriram too had heard about this *Matha*; but when he saw the plight of the *Matha*, he was dejected. No one could say that the *Matha* (which was confined to a simple two-storey building) was the main center of *Sanatan Dharma* in western India.

Shriram made a request to meet the Acharya (Head Priest) of the *Matha*, Swami Bharti Krishna Teerth. Shriram was under the impression that it would be difficult to meet the Shankaracharya, as they were highly regarded. In fact, in other *Mathas* and *Ashrams*, he experienced that kind of behavior. He had made an opinion that the people of high name and fame behaved arrogantly. He thought it was likely that Shankaracharya of Govardhan *Matha* might not be of that type; even then as a precautionary measure, he sent a message to *Maharajji* through one volunteer. Only a few volunteers were seen in the *Matha*. Some *Batukas* too were seen working here and there. Shriram guessed that they might be *Brahmacharis* of the *Ashram*. He started watching that building carefully, where the main temple was situated and Acharya too lived there. It appeared that the building had not been repaired or whitewashed for many years. The layer of paint was cracked at several places and it fell down by mere touch.

As Shriram was thinking about the condition of the *Matha*, suddenly a young *Sanyasi* appeared on the door and said – 'Come, come'. His voice appeared to be very polite. Shriram thought that he might be some *sanyasi* close to *Maharajji*. He said – "I am Shriram Sharma. I have come from Brij region. I have come here with a desire to meet *Maharajji*."

The Sanyasi expressed his pleasure to know his introduction. He said – "I know, the person whom you want to meet; he is standing in front of you! Please come! Come in!" Immediately, Shriram bowed down and touched the feet of Maharajshri. Shriram was impressed by his touching simplicity and elegance. He followed Maharajishri. Then they sat down in a room. During the talks with Maharajshri, he came to know that the financial status of the *Matha* was miserable. The scholars of history and culture describe Shankar *Mathas* with pride. They also praise their contribution, but no one cares to improve their condition.

Shriram said -"I feel there is shortage of dedicated volunteers in the Ashram."

"Shortage!" – Maharajji said – "There are no volunteers at all. There are seven-eight *Brahmacharis*. They are all adolescents. They hardly get any time from their studies. What could be expected from these teenagers?"

Shriram suggested – "The guardians of these students may be asked to help." Maharajshri replied that it was not possible as these children had come from poor families. Their parents could not bear the expenses of their formal education, then how could they help the Ashram financially.

Knowing that the burden of education, board, lodging etc of *Brahamcharis* is also borne by the Ashram, Shriram said – "Then the condition is more complex. Is it not possible to approach the society and get the cooperation of the people?"

Volunteers first, Temple later

"But for that also volunteers will be required" – said Maharajshri –"I myself cannot go for collecting alms. The discipline made by Adi Shankaracharya prevents me to do so. Whatever can be collected through the cooperation of people visiting the temple is being done. That just meets the minimum needs of the Ashram."

No solution could be found from the talks. Shriram came out of the Ashram with the impression – "The traditional religious organizations lack sensitivity. As there are no activities that are directly useful to the society, they are unable to draw the attention of the people. They also don't have power. In spite of being extraordinary in *Tapasya* and genius, the head priests, Acharyas or saints do not have direct influence on the society." The cause of pitiable condition of the Shankar *Matha*, in spite of its historical prestige and dignity, appeared to be the lack of *sadhana* of society. He also felt the need of preparing the volunteers before making any temple or *Matha*. Contemplating on these lines, Shriram departed from Puri.

Meeting with Jalahari Baba

On the way to Tirupati, Shriram met some saints, one of which was Jalahari Baba. He met him (Baba) in Athirala *Teerth*, which was popular at the regional level. This *Teerth* is about one hundred kilometers from Madras (now Chennai). It is believed that Lord Parshuram took bath in a pond located here, after which he got deliverance from the sin of *Matrihatya* (maternal killing). There is a temple of Lord Shiva near the pond. Jalahari Baba had made his hermitage near this temple. He used to wear only the loin-cloth. There would be no other cloths on his body. Most of the time, he would sit near the *Dhooni* (fire-pit). His real name was different; but as he lived only on the *Ahar* (diet) of *Jala* (water), he was called Jalahari. People never saw him eating / drinking anything other than water. As Shriram approached Babaji, he tried to introduce himself. Baba responded with indifference. Shriram said – "I have one curiosity. Only you can satisfy." Jalahari Baba avoided the question and said – "No *sadhak* is able to remove other's doubts. The question is answered by the Source from where it arises or the Indwelling Lord satisfies it."

Shriram didn't give up. He said –"I want to ask something about you. People say that you survive only on water. Do the needs of body get fulfilled by it?" Hearing this, Baba removed his attention from *Dhooni* and looked at the questioner. After a few moments he said –"Are you not surviving on buttermilk and the bread of barley? Are the needs of body fulfilled by this diet?"

Shriram was taken aback by this answer of Baba. How did Baba know about his *sadhana – tapascharya*? Not many people knew about it even in the native place. No one, other than the near and dear ones at home, had the knowledge of his vow. Seeing Shriram stunned Baba said –"Don't worry. Not only me but many other *sadhaks* also know about your *sadhana* and its purpose. The astral guide, who has asked you to perform *tapa*, has also inspired many other *sadhaks* to help you."

A new fact was revealed about his *sadhana.* After that, Shriram didn't consider it necessary to ask anything more. But Baba said – "After the *darshan* of Lord Venkateshwara, you are visiting the Ashram of *Mahayogi* in Pondicherry. Is it? From there you go back home….(Pause). Now don't make me speak more. Some people are waiting outside."

Shriram glanced back. Some devotees were standing with folded hands outside Baba's hermitage. They had come to pay their respects to Baba. Shriram again bowed down to touch his feet and got up from there. He started contemplating on Baba's words of revelation.

Difficult Journey of Tirupati

It was appearing that, in future, he would have to accomplish great tasks. The participation in the freedom struggle was only a small part of that task. The background and the circumstances that inspired him to visit this place too were conveying that he should keep away from active political and social activities for some time.

On the way to Tirupati, several mythological stories, personal experiences and feelings of devotees about Lord Venkateshwara were heard. The temple of Lord Venkateshwara or Balaji, situated on Tirumala Mountain is the richest holy place in the world. This is no exaggeration; indeed this has been verified by the Revenue Department of the Government of Andhra Pradesh. The mountain on which it is situated is named 'Tirumala' which means literally 'Prosperous' (*Tirú* means rich and *malai* means mountain).

It is said that mythological Sheshanag is sitting here in the form of a mountain. That is why it is also called Sheshachal. While going up to get *darshan* (view) of Lord Venkateshwara, the holy mountain has to be trodden upon (considered to be a sacrilege), and hence some devotees bow down at the foot of the hill and go back. With reference to the Puranas, King Ambarish and *Bhakta* Prahlad didn't climb the mountain. They worshipped the Lord at the foot of the hill and returned. Ramanujacharya found a way out of this belief. He went up the mountain by repeatedly performing *Dandavat Pranam* (prostrating himself). Later on many devotees followed this procedure.

Sheshachal or Tirumala is surrounded by seven hills. Now-a-days a spiral shaped bus route has been made to reach the temple situated on the hill. The route is about 33 Km long from Tirupati. But in those days, the mountain had to be climbed up through a steep slope of about 8 km span. Out of this, the climb of 6 km was very tough. The climber had to stop at several places and take rest. It took about 7 – 8 hours for Shriram to climb up the hill. He also stopped at some places other than the resting ones.

The environment of Sheshachal was extremely charming. The hill was covered by Mango and Sandalwood trees. Therefore there was shade and scent present everywhere. It appeared as if he was traveling through the Ashrams of the *Rishis* as described in Ramayan and Mahabharat. A person, who has read these epics, when passing through such surroundings, will start imagining that the regions where seers and sages made their hermitages which were suffused with the atmosphere of *Puja – path, yagya*, etc, might have been of this kind.

He also visited Pandu cave which came on the way to Venkateshwara temple. This cave contains the idols of five Pandavas and the footprints of Lord Vishnu. Shriram felt the cave to be filled with live vibrations of *Tapa-Sadhana* and hence, instead of roaming here and there, he sat there and meditated for about half an hour. After that, without stopping anywhere he went straight to Tirupati temple. A feeling of exhilarating joy was awakened by looking at the standing idol (about 2 meters high) of the presiding deity (Lord Vishnu). *Chaturbhuji* Vishnu is holding *shankh* (conch shell) and *chakra* (discus) in his two hands. One hand is raised in *abhay mudra* (assurance of protection) and left hand is kept on the waist. All this is seen when one looks at the idol minutely, otherwise these expressions of the deity are hidden by clothes and ornaments. Now-a-days, one can get only a fleeting glimpse of the idol. The crowd surging from behind does not allow the devotee to stand in front of the idol even for a fraction of a minute. The volunteers of the temple too push them aside. But in those days, that surge of crowd was not there. The devotees used to wait for their turn. This patience evolved automatically after taking a tiring journey of several miles on foot.

Adornment of the Idol

How old is the temple? There are different opinions about this. Shriram didn't waste his time to investigate it. For about ten minutes he stood in front of the idol of Lord Venkateshwara (which is an integrated form of Lords Shiva and Vishnu) and gazed at it intently. At first glance it appeared that the radiance was coming from the ornaments of the idol. But when he saw minutely, he found that effulgence was emanating from the idol and not from the ornaments. The suggestion came from within. If the idol is suffused with consciousness, this effulgence ought to radiate. Dressing, adornment, etc are done to cover it. The effulgence of the idol may move the mind of a normal viewer. Then he may leave his familial duties and engage himself in worship / service of the Lord, for which the person's consciousness has not been developed thus far.

After watching the grandeur and regal arrangements, a thought came to Shriram that the splendor of the *Ishta / Aradhya* (object of adoration) of the millions should be like this only. Instead of going into more details, Shriram took more interest in the mode of worship. Prior to eleventh century, the method of worship was different. After that the *Puja* rituals are done as prescribed by Swami Ramanujacharya. In this method, the number of rituals is very large; for example, *ashtanga aarti, snan, bhojan, shayan*, etc are done through elaborate methods. In order to understand the mystery of these rituals, he sat down near *Pushkarni* (pond) for some time.

Extraordinary Realization

Performing the rituals in the mental world, Shriram was feeling awakened and enlightened. He was feeling that each ritual was awakening a specific thought / virtue in his mind. For example, when water was offered for *aachaman* to Venkateshwara, it appeared that the ray of sanctity emanated from the idol and entered in his own mind like a blessing. Similar rays kept coming when different rituals like *Prachhalan, Snan, Ahar, Vishram, Shayan, Mangla*, etc were performed. Some devotees were taking bath in the Pushkarni after getting their heads shaved. This tradition exists only in Tirupati. It is considered that the devotee after getting his wish fulfilled gets his head shaved. Shriram thought that this is a symbol of freeing oneself from the debt of gods (*Devrina*).

Possibly, the Puja – rituals may not be required for the *Sadhaks* of elevated status; but they are certainly needed for average devotees. After this realization, he started returning from Pushkarni. While returning, he looked up towards the peak of the temple. It was glittering in the sunshine. That glitter attracted the attention of Shriram. He stopped suddenly and started gazing the top. While he was gazing, someone from behind said – 'What are you gazing at? People see their future in it; are you also seeing something?"

Shriram heard these words; but he neither replied nor looked back. He perceived the snowy peak of Himalayas at the top of the temple. It was the same peak which he had seen when he was in the company of his *Gurudev* (guide) on the Himalayas. For a few moments, he could get the glimpse of his *Gurudev* also. When he again saw the temple top minutely, it was shining as usual. It was not difficult for

Shriram to decipher the message of this scene. It was very clear. Shriram again saw the temple top attentively and folding his hands bowed towards it. Then he bowed towards the main gate of the temple. He realized that, in future, Tirupati would become a bridge between North and South. If the endeavor of spreading *Gayatri Sadhana* and keeping the nation united has to be done, the vibrations of this place are the best to start from. Thinking this and gazing at the temple, he moved towards his next destination.

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18

Revelation of a New Vision

From Tirupati to Kanchi

The prestige and grandeur of Kanchi *Matha* is highest among the *Mathas* established by Adi Shankaracharya. Its tradition has remained almost uninterrupted. The scholarship and *Tapasya* of the *Acharyas* (Head Priests) of this *Matha* had also been exemplary. The *Acharyas* of other *Mathas* too are no less advanced in erudition and ascetic practices. Probably the major factor contributing to the popularity and prosperity of Kanchi *Matha* is that there had been almost no external intrusions and disturbances. In other *Mathas,* from time to time, there had been invasions of tyrants and interference from fanatical rulers. In some cases, the invaders had even damaged the shrines.

It is worth mentioning that some scholars do not consider Kanchi *Matha* to be established by Adi Shankaracharya. It is also well known that Adi Shankar established only four *Mathas*; namely, at Badrinath, Dwarka, Jagannath Puri and Shringeri. He made his four prominent disciples the first *Acharyas* of these four *Mathas* and gave them the responsibility of dissemination of the message of Sanatan Dharma in their respective regions. Some scholars do not consider the existence of the fifth *Matha* at all. But the fact is that Kanchi Shankar *Matha* still exists and existed over the past several centuries. The popular belief is that Adi Shankaracharya got four of his disciples seated in four places and he himself started living at this place –Kanchi and that he spent last few years of his life here only. Some scholars say that Adi Shankaracharya shed his physical sheath at this place.

When Shriram entered Kanchi, he was aware of these facts. On his way from Tirupati to this place, he came to know many strange facts about this *Teerth*. Such discussions are not normally heard in North India. Among these, special mention was made about the construction of Kanchi Nagar from spiritual point of view. Mahatma Sivanand Swami, who was accompanying Shriram from Tirupati, disclosed many spiritual mysteries. He was himself a staunch devotee of Goddess Kamakshi (the presiding deity of the *Matha*). He used to reside and do his *tapa-sadhana* in some forest in South India. He had resolved to have *darshan* of Kamakshi Devi in Kanchi on the full moon day. He was going to visit Kanchi in that context. He told that the township was developed according to the directions from Adi Shankaracharya. The reference of this kind of *Vastu Vidya* is not available in any scripture. Acharyasri had given this shape with his inner vision. It is due to this configuration and the spiritual ambience in the town that the minds of the visitors / pilgrims become elevated. The visitors are automatically oriented towards spirituality.

Kamakshi temple: A unique religious monument

Adi Shankaracharya made the map of Kanchi Township such that the Kamakshi temple remains at the center. *Shriyantra* is well known for its auspicious effects in *Yoga* and *Tantra*. Therefore the entire township has been made in the shape of *Shriyantra*. In order to keep this *Teerth* surcharged with spiritual vibrations, he started several traditions. In fact Kamakshi Devi is a form of Adi Shakti Parvati. Her worship inspires a person to achieve self-realization, apart from fulfilling his materialistic ambitions. Adi Shankaracharya brought the idol of Shiva called 'Yogalinga' from Kailash Mansarovar and established it here. He also made it a point that worship of this idol is done only by a *Brahmachari* (celibate). Accordingly, he made one of his new disciples the Head Priest of this *Matha*. People thought that Adi Shankaracharya would make his main disciple, Sureshwaracharya, as the Head Priest. But Sureshwaracharya was a householder (married) before taking *Sanyas*. He was not a *Bal-Brahmachari* (celibate from childhood) and hence he was not entrusted with this job.

Kanchi is one of the seven holy cities believed to be favorable for achieving salvation. Adi Shankaracharya got one thousand temples constructed here. In those temples, more than ten thousand '*Shivalingas*' were established. At present, hardly two hundred temples are in good condition. The rest have been destroyed by the blows of time and cruel rulers. Shriram did not devote much time in these temples. He went straight to Kailashnath temple. It is one of the oldest temples of India. It was constructed by a Pallava king in the eighteenth century. Beautiful idols of Shiva Parvati, in dancing posture, have been established in the sanctum sanctorum. The idols of Brahma and Vishnu are also placed there. It seems that the two Lords are enjoying the dance of Gouri – Shankar. The architecture of the temple is amazingly attractive and awe-inspiring.

Cosmic Movement is due to the Dance of God

After visiting Kailashnath temple, Shriram was going towards Kamakshi temple. On the way, he heard a devotee sing some prayer in a melodious voice. The message of the prayer was that this world is not an inert creation of but a live Divine Dance. The cosmic movement is visible, when He dances; and it ceases when He stops. The man-made sculpture and its sculptor are two separate entities. But this creation (the world) cannot be separated from the Ceartor as there cannot be a dance without a dancer. The message of the prayer was quite mysterious. But more touching were the melodies coming out from that voice.

In the Kamakshi temple, Shriram stood in front of the idol of Goddess Parvati and repeated the essence of that prayer. From there he went to the *Matha* and sent a message to Swami Chandrashekharendra Saraswati, who was the Acharya (Head Priest) of the *Matha*. In a short time, he received a call. Visitors were paying respects to Swamiji from a distance. People used to call him Swamigal. He never allowed anyone to touch his feet. He also didn't call anybody near him. From his lean and thin but high physical frame, the radiance of *Tapa* was clearly visible. Like other visitors, Shriram too paid his respects. Swamigal indicated him to sit down. He asked his well-being in Sanskrit. He knew Hindi; but could express himself better in Sanskrit. After initial exchange of pleasantries, he watched carefully the dress of Shriram and said – "Are you a follower of Mohandas"?

By Mohandas, he meant Mahatma Gandhi. Before starting the freedom struggle Bapu met Sawmigal. In order to understand India properly, Gandhiji visited each and every corner of the country. He had disclosed his future plans to Swamigal during his meeting. Swamigal had advised him (Bapu) that the struggle should not be aimed at mere transfer of power. The aim of freedom struggle should be to restore the glory of the nation and its perennial spiritual heritage. Mahtama Gandhi had met him during the early years of his return to India. At that time he was known as Mohandas and hence Swamiji knew him by this name. In the later years of Gandhiji's movement, several ennobling concepts / ideas like – *Swadeshi, Swadharma, Bhartiyata,* etc got included in the national struggle for freedom. These concepts / ideas certainly came from his inner being. But Swami Chandrashekharanand Saraswati was one of the few great men who had influenced Gandhiji greatly. Mahatma Gandhi has himself mentioned this fact indirectly in his autobiography. When Swamigal asked Shriram about his being a follower of Gandhiji, he could not say 'yes' or 'no'. Apart from social and political activities, his mind was more engrossed in *Tapa* and *Sadhana*. That is why he kept silent.

Swamigal could understand the dilemma of Shriram. He said – "Political activity is the first priority for Mohandas. *Dharma* and *Sadhana* are his personal and inner aspects. But perhaps this is not so with you. Your destiny is to keep the pursuit of *Dharma Dharna* in the forefront of your life's individual and social – inner and outer – activities of life."

Shriram felt moved by Swamigal's seer vision about his life's mission. It was well-known to him that he had support of *Siddha Yogis* for his *sadhana* and his future endeavors. There was open discussion with Swamigal on various topics that included scriptures along with Vedic tradition and present day circumstances. Those days Mahatma Gandhi's program of Harijan upliftment was a topic of controversy. In order to know the views of Swamigal in this context, Shriram asked him –

"Does a person become low or high on account of taking birth in lower or upper caste?"

Traditional Opinion

Shriram also asked this question because Swamigal was a saint and ascetic of high order. His views had weightage on such social issues. He replied – "Caste and creed too are the factors by which a person is counted as high or low."

"By taking birth in any family, a person can become untouchable or great. What is the mystery behind this?" – Asked Shriram.

Swamigal replied – "It is not possible to understand this mystery under the present circumstances. In those days when our seers and sages were doing different types of experiments for the spiritual upliftment, the rigid rules of *Varnas* (caste system) were made to continually uplift the level of consciousness (from life after life). In that period it was useful. Today it is not."

"What can be the benefit of considering a person low or high on the basis of *Varna* in any era?" – Shriram asked again.

Swamigal said – "Honor or dishonor on the basis of high or low caste was never useful. So long as the social environment was healthy, it was significant from spiritual point of view. People of similar tendencies, habits and impressions can live together happily. One gets protection and favorable environment in families and communities." Swamigal gave a break to this topic and said –"But these are the things of the past. The circumstances have changed considerably with the new education and governing system. Those things cannot be clung to now."

Discernment is Essential for Adapting Traditions

Swamigal had his own opinions about worship of Gayatri, the right to study Vedas, the rituals of purification, religious procedures, etc. When Shriram talked about some of them, he found that his opinions were conservative; however they were not baseless. For example, he said about worship of Gayatri, "It is only for the Brahmans". However, during the discussion, it became clear that "The essence of Brahman is not taking birth in this caste, but the person should possess the attributes of Brahmanhood as prescribed in the Shastras" If it is not present, it should be earned. If the tendency is pious and inquisitive, the study of scriptures gives good results; otherwise, the misuse of mere intellectual knowledge leads to the destruction. Like *Asuras* (demons) such a person neither can do his own good nor that of the society. In the temples, *Puja –Aarti* (rituals of worship) should be done according to prescribed methods. Its aim is to infuse life and energy in the rituals.

New methods can also be devised, Swamigal said – "It is possible to amend the traditional ways of managing the temples, but that requires the right to do so. Such rights are obtained only from enlightened seers. If everyone starts doing modifications, it will lead to chaos." He gave an example to stress his point – "Rules of governing are made by the rulers / government. Isn't it? Only they are capable of enforcing them. Others cannot do so. In the field of religion / spirituality, introduction of the new traditions or any refinements are done only by the seers."

Shriram asked – "Is that right earned or given?" Swamigal said – "According to the need of the time and the society, it is given by the Almighty. The touchstone of the given right is that it is accompanied by the power to implement and sustain the required tradition or the method. If you make a rule and on following it no benefit is accrued, then what is the use making such a rule? This is child's play. Lord Shankaracharya synthesized several modes and methods of *Puja-Anushthan*. He could also generate the power to get the results out of them. Later on the tradition nourished them. Even now, it is possible to synthesize new methods. It can be done any time. The only requirement is the genuine authority to do so."

Determining the New Path

There was a long discussion. Swamigal hinted several times that the time has come for the new beginning. The seers have already chalked out an appropriate path befitting the prevailing circumstances for the inner and outer development of the people. What remains is its propagation by the right person. He didn't tell who that right person would be? How could he be identified? Who will certify his existence? Shriram didn't think it necessary to ask these questions. However, there was one doubt / curiosity lurking in his mind, which he put forth before Swamigal –"There may arise some hypocrites who may claim themselves to be the messengers of God. How will it be possible to distinguish between the genuine and fake?"

Swamigal said – "The society itself will recognize. It is also evident that it will not descend from the heavens. It will have the power of tradition behind it. There is going to be no refinement by neglecting the tradition (as approved by seers). Wherever such brashness is visible, it should be considered a fraud." After saying this Swamigal got up from his seat,saying – "One need not go into these subtleties. *Amma* (Goddess Kamakshi) and *Mahakal* (Lord Shiva) will themselves establish and make it evident."

After the discussion stopped, Shriram too got up. Swamigal instructed a few officials of the Ashram to take Shriram round the *Matha*. They enthusiastically showed him the temple, school, *Gurukul*, and *Yagyashala*, and made him aware of the several social service activities taken up by the *Matha*. Shriram observed them keenly. He inquired deeply about some of the establishments there. This inquiry was done in a manner as if he himself had to run such activities and that he was trying to understand the details of managing them.

Before leaving Kamakoti *Matha*, Shriram once again went to meet Swamigal. The latter presented him a *Mala* (rosary) of *Rudraksha* and *Sriyantra*, but he didn't say anything. Shriram said – "I heartily accept your blessings. Kindly keep on showering on me your grace." Swamigal said, pointing one by one towards *Mala* and *Sriyantra* – "Your innerself and the power of Bhagawati will make you successful." By *Mala*, he meant *Japa-Tapa* to be done for self-realization. The essence of *Sriyantra* was the accomplishments to be achieved with the help of divine grace. This *Yantra* is surcharged with the divine energies of prosperity and superhuman powers. Swamigal presented to Shriram the sanctified and potented *Yantra*. He vowed again and came out. From outside, he looked at the top of the *Matha* once again.

Journey to Sri Aurobindo's Ashram

Those days, Sri Aurobindo Ashram was limited to a few houses and an open ground. Now-a-days, it is spread over about twenty six square kilometers. In the decade of thirties, there were thirty five to forty *sadhaks* in the Ashram, apart from Sri Maa and Sri Aurobindo. Some of them used to live outside the Ashram in rented houses. The disciples of Sri Aurobindo from India and abroad used to visit the Ashram now and then. However, there were not many general visitors to the Ashram as, at that time, there was nothing much to see as such. There was environment for *sadhana* and self-study. At the set time, Sri Maa would daily sit with the seekers. Sometimes there would be discussions on spiritual topics. What interest a general visitor could have in such a discussion?

During his journey, Shriram used to gather as much information as possible about the destination. This had become his habit. Instead of useless gossip with the fellow passengers, Shriram would discuss matters related to history, traditions and the nature of people of the region. Normally people add spices to their talks especially when it comes to giving information about holy places or holy men. But Shriram had also learnt the art of extracting the useful information from that mix.

Background Information of Pondicherry

Prior to reaching Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Shriram knew many things about Pondicherry and the Ashram. This was not under British India, but under French rule. There were no crops except that of onion. Production from the adjoining sea was only fish. There was no connection of Pondicherry with rest of India or the British Government. Only packed food that came from France was available. It was relatively cheaper. When Sri Aurobindo came here, he survived only on milk and bread. After the arrival of Sri Maa, some variety came in the food of *sadhaks*. She got planted vegetables and flowers in the vacant land near the Ashram. Slowly they started keeping cows; and in due course a full *Goshala* (cowshed) was developed. Sri Maa started this work in 1926 and it had expanded magnificently in twelve-thirteen years.

Shriram got this information from co-passengers before reaching the Ashram. Evidently, those co-passengers were the people who used to visit the Ashram regularly. It was also known from them that machines were also used in the Ashram depending on exigencies. Extreme care was taken about the purity of food. Cow's milk was primarily chosen as the food for spiritual progress.

The present Pondicherry was designed and developed by the French architect, Martin in the eighteenth century. It was the expansion of the same thing that was seen by Shriram in 1937 and is visible even now. In Tamil language, *Pundu* means new and *Cherry* means city. In fact the old name of the city was 'Punducherry'; but gradually it got pronounced as Pondicherry. Prior to this, this city was named 'Medapuri' which means city of knowledge. According to a mythological story, seer Agastya had made his Ashram and did *Tapasya* at this place. In order to cause the justice to be given to a sandpiper, the seer drank the entire water of sea from this place. Getting acquainted with all such information, Shriram entered the Ashram at around 1 PM.

A volunteer named Rajani Bhai was posted at the reception. His parents lived in Haridwar. About thirty – thirty five years back they made their home on the bank of Ganga. Rajani Bhai's age might be above forty. He spent a few years of his childhood in Haridwar. He had also visited Mathura – Vrindavan. For the past three years, Rajani Bhai was in Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He was very happy, when he came to know that a *sadhak* from Ganga –Yamuna region had come there. He was delighted to know that Shriram was a *sadhak* but that he was not a disciple of Sri Aurobindo; and that he had gone there not for seeking any spiritual help from him but for learning something which could be helpful in his own spiritual search.

Assurance of Divine Consciousness

Those days Sri Aurobindo lived in solitude. From the beginning of the year 1926, he started handing over the responsibility of the Ashram and *sadhaks* to Sri Maa. At that time, Sri Maa's age might have been around fifty years. On 24th November 1926, *sadhaks* participating in a meeting had a divine realization. All *sadhaks* went into trance and attained a state of collective *Samadhi*. This state remained for forty five minutes. When the silence broke and *sadhaks* returned to their normal state, it appeared as if they had seen a divine vision. Due to this collective realization and the divine invisible forces working in the background, this day was declared as '*Siddhi Divas*' (a day of attainment). After this miraculous event, Sri Aurobindo went into solitude.

Rajani Bhai gave all this information to Shriram, though he knew all this beforehand. Rajani Bhai also made arrangement for his stay in the Ashram and told him to come to him after taking meals, etc. He also fixed an appointment for him with Sri Maa. In the afternoon, he too was to meet Sri Maa. This time was reserved for the volunteers of the Ashram and dedicated *sadhaks*. In the evening *darshan*, there were ten-twelve people. Among them, there were a few *sadhaks* also.

Sri Maa raised her right hand to bless the new visitor who was none other than Shriram. He tried to introduce himself, but before he could do so, Sri Maa called him by his name. When expression of amazement appeared on Shriram's face, she said – "There is no need to get surprised. I have not known you through any *siddhi*; rather Rajani has written your name in the list of visitors. I understood from that."

Saying this Sri Maa laughed. This was a fun. Shriram too laughed and so also others present there. But this fun–laughter stopped in few moments. A volunteer reported, "Rama is not eating properly. (Rama was the name of a cow in the *Goshala.*) She is not sick; she also gives plenty of milk, but does not take her food (grass, water, etc). What should be done?" Sri Maa closed her eyelids. She remained silent for some time and then spoke –"Gwala (milkman) has beaten her calf; that is why she is angry. Convey to the Gwala that he should apologize to Rama for what he has done to her calf." In one quarter of the Ashram, the windows could not be closed properly. They were repaired but the problem was not fixed. Perhaps the person asking the solution for this problem was expecting a similar interior cause. But nothing of that kind happened. Sri Maa told him to get them repaired again; and that the carpenter had not worked carefully so must be watched.

People were discussing very small things with Sri Maa. Shriram was wondering and also thinking that they should themselves sort out such things. Someone narrated the incident of Mahatma Gandhi. A meeting was going on in Sevagram about some program to be organized in connection with the freedom struggle. Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and some other leaders were present. The topic was that there was no coordination among the volunteers. This was affecting the freedom struggle. Bapu too was participating in that discussion. As he was talking to some leader, lamb of a goat came running amidst the leaders and sat near Bapu. Bapu's eyes fell on its leg which was injured. In fact the lamb sat in a way as to attract the attention of Bapu and convey its pain. Bapu got up saying to the leaders, "You please talk on this matter. In the meantime, I will apply a mud pack to this lamb and come back." The leaders started gazing at each other in astonishment. Nehru even got irritated thinking that lamb's injury was more important than sorting out the problems related to freedom struggle. Knowing this incident, Sri Maa first smiled and then said – "On reaching a certain level of consciousness, the duty in hand becomes more important. The outward importance of the work does not have much meaning."

Some Specific Purpose

When the talks with all the *sadhaks* present there were complete, Sri Maa looked at Shriram and said – "You are new here but not for us. There was no need for you to come here for any consultation; that could have been possible at the meta-physical level. The purpose of our meeting is much more profound."

Shriram was silently looking at Sri Maa. Some other *sadhaks* were also present there. Sri Maa indicated that the time of *darshan* was over and that the *sadhaks* should go, but asked Shriram to stay back. She started saying – "Sri Aurobindo is now living in seclusion. Had he been visiting places, it was likely that both of you could have met at some place. But he is busy in making an effort in the direction of ushering in of a New Era. The divine powers that have assigned him this work, have called you too here."

"But I don't have any such inner flash. Perhaps I have been inspired to come here by my teacher, Sri Maa." – said Shriram. Sri Maa replied – "You have visited other places too; but this is not important. Sri Aurobindo considers this Ashram to be a laboratory. Some experimental tests for bright future are being conducted here. He has some expectations from you."

On hearing this, Shriram's face was lit up with enthusiasm. It appeared as if he was readying himself for listening further. After a short pause, Sri Maa said – "There are mainly three visions about this world. The first one matches with the views of Shankar and Buddha that this world is an illusion, it is false; that is why there is pain and suffering here. There is only one work worth doing here and that is – get out from here, get salvation and become one with the unmanifest Brahma. The second vision is that of Vedanta – God is omnipresent. Essentially He is present everywhere but its manifested form is corrupt; it is covered up by the darkness of ignorance. In order to get rid of it, be stable in the Self. Don't worry about the world. The third view is modern or new. It has been investigated by Sri Aurobindo. According to him, whatever be the shape of the world today, it is incomplete. It is a dim and distorted form of what it has to become. It is not the direct manifestation of the divine consciousness, but it has to become that. Its creation is for the undiluted manifestation of all forms and aspects of God."

According to this message of Sri Maa, a new world order has to evolve. Whosoever is making efforts in the direction of spirituality should try to understand this as the will of God. During that conversation itself, Sri Maa called Shriram a 'Yogi'. Next morning, it was decided for him to meet Sri Aurobindo. He was in complete seclusion. He didn't appear in public or in private except on *Siddhi Divas* and other dates of *darshan*.

A little-known Context

In special contexts, there is always room for exceptions. Indeed the meeting of Shriram with Sri Aurobindo in seclusion was an exception. What transpired between the two is a matter of anybody's guess. After several years, Shriram gave only the hints of that discussion held in 1937. According to him, the task of setting up a laboratory for inner transformation of aspiring seekers was given to him. Aurobindo Ashram, as an institution, was trying to create an environment where the divine energies could be activated in the seekers. The responsibility that was given to Shriram was that he should start uniting such seekers who might look ordinary from outside but are open and eager from within to be unhindered mediums for the inflow of the divine energies. Individual as well as institutional efforts should be such that the divine consciousness would appear to manifest all-around.

Sri Aurobindo said – "In the coming days, life will become more complex. Then people will have to face more problems. A detached attitude towards family is essential in *sadhana*. One should not neglect the family but should also not get totally immersed in worldly pursuits for the sake of the family. When a person enters spiritual life, the familial bonds are loosened; new relations start developing. The result of getting tied to the worldly relations is – bondage to the lower nature."

This meeting continued for about forty minutes. Shriram stayed in the Ashram for two more days. During the discussions, Sri Maa disclosed some more facts about the Ashram. According to Sri Maa, the aim of Ashram is to integrate Yoga in life. For this purpose, one has to accept the realities of life. Therefore, there should be no such activity in the Ashram that contradicts life. Shriram started visualizing the picture of an Ashram to be developed by him in future.

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'Akhand Jyoti' Begins Its Journey

Changed Routine and a New Resolve

He was contemplating that meditation, worship or prayer should be an integral part of the daily routine of (his future) Ashram. A code of conduct should also be established. As far as possible, it should be followed by the inmates of the Ashram. No rule should be flouted due to sheer laziness. After staying for two days in Sri Aurobindo Ashram and studying its routine, Shriram noted down his experiences as well as his reactions. These were published in the form of an article titled '*Naye yug ka vidhan*' (The Constitution of New Era) in 'Sainik'. Some parts of the article were published elsewhere also. The zeal that was awakened in Sri Aurobindo Ashram about the integration of life and spirituality kept Shriram's mind busy all the time during his travel back home.

After returning to Agra, Shriram got engaged in his work as usual, but there was passionate eagerness to do something new. After returning from the South, due to the gloom overshadowing the political atmosphere, he started realizing that it would not result in any substantial achievement if he remained stuck to the newspaper. The reasoning was that newspapers provided only the information. At the most they could charge the people with emotion for some time, but the real purpose was not served by that.

The innerself of Shriram asked – "What purpose do you want to achieve?" No answer came. There was silence for a very long time. The dilemma continued for many days. On the other side, the political activities were almost dead. Only an illusive enthusiasm was visible. There was no matter worth reporting in the newspaper. Congress had formed governments in the provinces; but the truth was that the British Rule and the Congress, both, were dependent on each other. In other words, both of them were in a dilemma, because neither was trustful of this partnership.

The newspapers started writing that both the sides should forget the past and trust each other. As the two sides were now working together, the mutual antagonism was gradually softening up. The personal secretary to Mahatma Gandhi wrote a letter to Sri G. D. Birla, in which it was mentioned – 'Contemplate on the fact that Mr. Garret, the commissioner of Ahmedabad, goes to station to receive Morarji Bhai and that he travels with him in the third class compartment for a long distance.'

Inspiration from *Akhand Deepak*

This letter was published in the newspapers. Congress volunteers were glad to read such stories. But Shriram was not enthused. He considered this success to be illusory, that was bound to fall like a castle of sand. By the time September arrived, he became very anxious. *Ashwin Navratra* was to commence the next day. In the evening, before going to sleep, he took a resolve to conduct special *puja* during *Navratra*. He also prayed to the Lord to lead him out of this dilemma. Next morning he got up and, after his daily chores, sat down for *Sadhana*. He concentrated his vision on *Akhand Deepak* that was lighted twelve years back. He immersed himself in its light. When the formal *Upasana* was over, he again looked at the *Akhand Deepak*. After that the sequence of words that came to his mind is like this: *Jyoti* (flame), *Deepak ki Jyoti* (flame of a lamp), *Akhand Deepak* (uninterruptedly lighted lamp), and *Deepak ki Akhand Jyoti* (uninterrupted flame of the lamp). Then this thought deepened – "A magazine titled 'Akhand Jyoti' has to be launched. The lighted *Deepak* established in the *puja*-room enlightens its ambience directly as well as indirectly. 'Akhand Jyoti', the title that has come to my mind with the inspiration of the *Akhand Deepak* should enlighten the world."

Withdrawing himself from the world of news, Shriram decided to publish 'Akhand Jyoti' magazine; and within a few days also informed his friends and well-wishers about this step. The wages that he received when he was working for 'Sainik daily' were not so much that he could save anything. Further, the liberty of few years that was given by the spiritual guide for participating in freedom struggle was also over. So he again adopted the strict discipline in his *Mahapurashcharana Sadhana* as he had done before. *Japa-Tapa* was continuing as usual.

However, he became stricter regarding food, daily routine and social contacts. Due to all this, there was no time or means for earning additional resources.

Taiji got Mental Peace

Shriram went to his village, Aanwalkheda, and informed Taiji about his new resolve / program. She only asked – "Did your Gurudev ask you to do it?" Shriram nodded his head in affirmation. Taiji reproached lightly – 'Now what will happen to *Swarajya* (independence)? Will you not work for it now?"

"Mother! We will certainly get *Swarajya* in a few years. Now I have to work for *Ramrajya* (perfect world). Gurudev is asking me to work for it." – Shriram replied. On hearing this Taiji started singing softly the verses of Ram Charit Manas – "*Daihik devik bhautik tapa, Ramraj nahi kahuhi vyapa*." (Meaning: In *Ramrajya*, there is no suffering of any kind to anyone.) Then she said – "Isn't the same *Ramrajya*?" – Saying this she blessed him and thus permitted him to prepare for the publication of the magazine. She was happy due to another reason also; and it was that Shriram would no longer be entangled in *Andolan – Dharnas*, etc. The strenuous running about here and there would stop and there would be no worry of police raids or arrests. Taiji said – "My blessings are also with you for the task the Lord has assigned you. I have very little desire and that is already known to you."

Shriram said – "Yes, Yes; I know very well. Neither I am leaving you nor will I take you out of the land of Thakurji (Lord Krishna)." Whenever a new topic arose in which there seemed some possibility of going somewhere, then there was only one insistence of Taiji that Shriram should not become an ascetic. This time again, she was trying to drive home the same point; but before she could begin, Shriram repeated his resolve. He stayed in Aanwalkheda for three more days. There was no person with whom he could discuss about his new plans. From this point of view, this was an unfavorable condition; but from the point of view of solitary contemplation, self-reflection and conceiving original ideas, this was an ideal situation.

Outline of 'Akhand Jyoti' Started Taking Shape

While making the plan, Shriram filled several pages. When he thought on all the aspects, like the contents of the magazine, writing, editing, printing, distribution, etc, it appeared that the task was not easy and that it would require some companions or co-workers; and these companions had to be such that they had some experience. The new venture could not be carried on with the help of neo-learners. The solution to this came from within – "We will see after reaching Agra" Then another thought followed, "Due to the slackness in the Press-world, some workers might be searching new jobs. They can be employed." This train of thoughts was interrupted by Taiji. She said – "I am observing from yesterday. What are you engrossed in? Is there any problem?"

"No Tai" – He said – "In fact my mind is tired and hence I am silent."

Taiji said – "Then take rest. Don't worry too much about ushering in of *Ramrajya*. All the resources will be collected. I will arrange. When will this property of the ancestors come into worthwhile use?" She kept her hand on the forehead of Shriram and shook his head slightly. Then she sat in front of him and said – "Will you take Bahu (daughter-in-law) and Om (grandson) with you?"

Shriram looked towards mother's face. Taiji said, "Till now there were many co-workers in the press. So there was no problem. But when you start new work, you will be alone. Who will share your load?" Taiji paused for a few moments and then said again – "Do it like this. Take Bahu and Shraddha (younger daughter) with you and leave Om and Daya (elder daughter) here. I will take care of them. Shraddha is very young, so she will need her mother."

Preparation for Going to Agra

He didn't reply to Taiji. So she said further – "You might be thinking that I promised you to take care of the children till the independence is achieved; but now I am changing. No! I stand firm on my resolve. Bahu will live in Agra and take care of you and will represent me."

Shriram listened to this talk also silently. He didn't resist. His silence was taken as acceptance of Taiji's proposal. Accordingly Taiji started collecting at one place all the necessary household items like ration, utensils, beddings, clothings, etc. Shriram realized that the preparations were being made for his shifting to Agra with family. The space in the house, where he stayed in Agra earlier, was not sufficient for the full family. Further, one extra room was required for publishing 'Akhand Jyoti' magazine. The advice of Taiji to keep wife and younger daughter with him sounded good, but the arrangement of a house with more space was to be done. So he requested Taiji to wait for some time. Taiji agreed.

Life in its Entirety

After returning to Agra, Shriram shared his new plan with Babu Gulab Rai, Jagan Prasad Rawat and Veni Prasad Sharma of Kashi. During that period, Sri Veni Prasadji was in Agra. Shriram also wrote about his plan to Sri Hanuman Prasad Poddar, editor of 'Kalyan' and Sri Durga Shankar Nagar, editor of 'Kalpavriksha'. In those days, only two Hindi magazines titled 'Kalyan' and 'Kalpavriksha' were published containing topics on religion – spirituality, *sadhana*, culture, yoga, devotion, etc.

The editor of 'Kalyan' wrote back– "We give priority to the teachings of saints and seers. It is possible that their thoughts / opinions might contain some old traditions, rituals and customs that have become obsolete today. It is not necessary that we agree with them on all counts. But as they are the messages of saints, we are publishing them as such. It will be good, if you can do some modification befitting the present times. There are many traditions that have become redundant today. Your opinion that they should not be considered significant / important because they are traditions; they should be followed / judged through discernment – is good."

Suggestions and Good Wishes

Shriram noted these lines of the letter in his diary. Other scholars also gave their suggestions. All of them were overwhelmed that a monthly magazine for propagating practical spirituality was going to be published. When Shriram sent the letter regarding his plan, he also included his introduction in it that he was actively taking part in the freedom struggle and was also associated with journalism. After getting acquainted with these facts, the scholars sent good wishes for the project; at the same time, they also had some expectations from him. Shriram appropriately replied to all those letters and expressions of good wishes.

Durga Shankar Nagar of Ujjain suggested that: There should be sufficient coverage in 'Akhand Jyoti' of topics like 'other worlds' and 'life beyond death' as life was not limited to the time span between birth and death but a journey in eternity in many dimensions of existence. Durga Shankar Nagar was a spiritually evolved soul. Apart from *Sadhana* and *Atmavidya* he also an adept at contacting the departed souls and could arrange conversations between them and their living relatives.

Shriram left the old house and hired a new one. There were three rooms in it. Wife Saraswati Devi, along with daughters Shraddha and Daya, also joined him. Only Omprakash remained in Aanwalkheda with Taiji. The purpose of family joining him was to share the day-to-day burden of Shriram and also to take care of the household.

The new house was located in Freeganj ward of Agra. Out of the three rooms, one was to be used as an office of Akhand Jyoti. The second room was for *Puja –Path* (worship) and also as a sitting-room; and the third one for personal use as well for the guests. Kitchen was separate. The expenditure and responsibilities increased four-fold. There was no proper source of regular income. So long as he was working in 'Sainik', the wages were of some help. Now the entire arrangement was to be made by self. Taiji assured that they could easily pull on with the income from agriculture. Initially Shriram had some hitch in using that money but later on made up his mind to take it as a loan till the alternative arrangements had been made. Taiji objected to it –"Why are you considering it as a loan?" Shriam's answer was – "You have already donated this wealth to the society." Taiji had no rebuttal for this. Shriram said – "I will take a small fraction of the income generated by the magazine as my salary. Rest of the income will be utilized in the expansion of Akhand Jyoti." By 'the expansion of Akhand Jyoti', he meant the ever-increasing propagation of the inspirations from the Primordial Power, Vedmata Gayatri.

First Issue Published

The first issue of Akhand Jyoti was published in January 1938. In those days, there was no tradition of inauguration or release ceremony of any publication. It was the day of *Vasant Panchami*. Shriram did *pranam* to Taiji and requested her to place the first copy of the magazine at the feet of Vedmata. The *Akhand Deepak* was also kept near it. The light of this lamp was falling on the front page of the magazine. It appeared as if Goddess Gayatri was showering her blessings. After this dedication in the *Puja*-room, the magazine was distributed to friends and scholars.

With the publication of the first issue, the preparation started for the second issue, but there were formidable obstacles in the path. There was slackness in the market. Second World War was about to start; and hence apart from fiscal deficit, there was also scarcity of essential commodities. The first problem was procuring printing paper at a reasonable cost. It could be obtained for the first issue; but the trader who promised to supply paper started making excuses. He was talking of supplying paper at eight to ten times higher prices and that too there was no guarantee of continuous supply. Other traders also talked in similar voice. Press too was in a miserable condition. The laborers were available but the magazine could not be published with their help alone. The members, who promised to subscribe to Akhand Jyoti and also to cooperate in this venture, withdrew.

The second issue of the magazine could not be published in time. The more he tried to manage the affairs, the more they got unmanageable. After trying for three months continuously, Shriram made up his mind to start afresh. It was decided that instead of making arrangements for each and every issue separately, a lump sum arrangements should be made for one full year; that the publication should be resumed only when the resources were collected for publishing at least twelve issues regularly.; that it should not matter even if it took one or two years for re-starting; but after re-starting, the heart –breaking effort should not be required to publish the very next issue. In this preparation, it took about one and half years.

Sudarsan-bearing Lord Krishna on the Front Page

It was announced that 'Akhand Jyoti' was going to be published again from *Vasant Parva* of 1940. The colored photograph of Lord Krishna holding *Sudarsan Chakra* was printed on the front cover page of January 1940 issue.

The magazine was printed beforetime. Two-three days prior to *Vasant Panchmi*, Shriram called Taiji from Aanwalkheda; and on the day of *Vasant Panchmi* (fifth day of lunar month of Magh), in the morning, requested Taiji to offer the first copy to Goddess Gayatri. Taiji offered *Roli-Akshat* on it and placed it in front of Mother Gayatri. Wife, Saraswati Devi, also participated in the offering process. Shriram sung *Aarti* and thus completed the divine dedication of Akhand Jyoti (literally meaning 'Light Divine') in the light of '*Akhand Deepak*'

The first copy, by post, was sent to Mahatma Gandhi, at his center of activities, Sevagram. He gave, by hand, one copy each to Babu Gulab Rai and Sri Krishna Datta Paliwal. Hanuman Prasad Poddar, editor of 'Kalyan', Ramakrishna Mission, Kolkata, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and Shankar *Mathas* of Puri and Kanchi were also in his mailing list. Every member was requested to send his impartial opinion / feedback about the magazine. The readers were also requested to give their opinions about the contents, distribution arrangement, the quality of printing and even the selection of paper and photos.

Five hundred copies of the first issue were printed. Before it was sent for binding, the matter of the second issue was given to the press for composing. About three hundred fifty copies were sent by post. Shriram himself wrote their addresses by hand. Using carbons, several copies of addresses were made. Saraswati Devi cut these addresses and pasted them on the wrappers. Whatever time was made available after the care of the two daughters and the home, she would spend in the magazine work. For the second issue, she even helped in wrapping the covers on the magazine.

Feedback

In the beginning, Shriram used to locally distribute the magazine by his own hands. In the third-fourth month, one volunteer came forward to help him. In fact that volunteer had earlier worked with him during the days of freedom struggle. He had great faith in Shriram's noble aim. He participated in freedom struggle, with the inspiration from Shriram. When he saw a new beginning in the form of Akhand Jyoti, he joined Shriram in this venture. He used to keep accounts, do correspondence and also distribute about two hundred copies by hand from home to home. By the time, second issue could be published, several letters of readers arrived. Scholars and great men to whom Shriram has specifically written earlier too replied. Message of Mahatma Gandhi came, in which he advised him to avoid criticizing others and to keep harmony with all religions / faiths.

Hanuman Prasad Poddar, the editor of 'Kalyan', said that Akhand Jyoti had inspired a ray of hope. At that time, 'Kalyan' had twenty thousand subscribers. He had high hopes from Akhand Jyoti, because in the very first issue, the resolve of spreading the message of *Adyashakti* Gayatri of Indian religious tradition amongst the masses was expressed vividly.

The feedback came from all sections of the society. The powerful reaction was that of Taiji. She didn't say anything when she offered the first issue of the magazine at the feet of Goddess Gayatri. After about a month, one day she suddenly said – "Shriram, you have published the magazine of Gayatriji from Agra. There is a photo of Sudarsan-bearing Lord Krishna printed on its cover page. How good it would have been had this magazine got published from His *Dham* (Mathura)?"

Place of Publication Shifted to Mathura

Taiji's suggestion added weight to a similar thought that was already going through Shriram's mind. He too was thinking on the following lines – "Agra, apart from being a center of literary, administrative and political activities, is also a city of tourists. It has its own historical importance; but for religious – cultural activities, Mathura is better. Normally, the historical places like Agra, Gwalior, Bhopal or Delhi cannot be preferred for religious activities." Otherwise also, Taiji always had a fancy for Mathura – Vrindavan.

Mother's devotion and the significance of the *Teerth* were attracting Shriram to Mathura. He felt that taking Akhand Jyoti to Mathura was also the need of the future. One dream connected this thought with *Yug Gayatri*. The dream occurred one day prior to the commencement of *Ashwin Navratri*. The *sankalpa* (resolve) for *Navratri Puja* was to be taken next morning. In the same night Shriram dreamt – "Revered father was sitting on *Vyas Peeth* (dais for discourse). He was giving a discourse on Bhagwat. In the background of *Vyas Peeth*, the photo of *Sudarsan*-bearing Lord Krishna, similar to the one printed on the front cover page of Akhand Jyoti, was hanging on the wall and his father, Pandit Roop Kishre Sharma, was giving a discourse on the topic 'Gayatri Bhagwat'. He was making it clear right in the beginning of the discourse that in the coming years, Bhagwat would be confined only to the scholars. After that, the time would also come when this scripture would become only a book for recitation. The spirit of religion and devotion present in it would vanish. In that era, the essence of Bhagwat would be understood through Gayatri alone."

Shriram further dreamt – "His father was establishing the idol of Gayatri in front of the photo of Lord Krishna; and along with the worship of Lord Krishna, he was also worshipping Goddess Gayatri. He appeared to be explaining the verse '*Satyam param dhimahi*' as he used to do in real *Katha* – weeks. While concluding he said that Sukdevji Maharaj gave the discourse of *Bhagwat Katha* in the Vrij region. Therefore, the discourse of *Katha* of Gayatri should also be done from the Vrij region. Saying this he got up from the dais and started walking from the birth place of Lord Krishna to Vrindavan. At that time, at the birth place of Lord Krishna, there was a small temple called Katara Keshav Dev. This temple was overshadowed by the adjacent mosque.

When father was seen going, it appeared to Shriram that Lord Krishna was also following him."

Experiences of Vrij

A few days after this dream, during meditation he felt as if his spiritual guide too was asking him to make Mathura the center for spreading the '*Sanatan Dharma*' filled with the inspirations of Bhagwat and the message of the Lord in the form of Gayatri Mantra. This realization came around *Deepawali*; and Shriram decided that Mathura should be made the center and that Agra should be left as early as possible.

He informed Taiji about this decision. She said – "I have a longstanding wish to live in Mathura. I used to tell your father also to live there. He didn't listen to me but Thakurji (Lord Krishna) did. It is He who is getting done everything through you." This reaction of Mother was like a blessing to Shriram. Next day itself he wrote a message to the subscribers of Akhand Jyoti. In this message, he declared that the center of publication is being shifted to Mathura; and that new activity related to *Sadhana* and *Sanskar* would soon be started there. After *Devotthan Ekadashi*, he went to Mathura for making new arrangements.

There was one literary friend of Shriram named Shiromaniji in Agra. His real name was different but he was famous by this name. He used to publish a newsletter titled 'Sahitya Sandesh'. For sometime he was also associated with 'Sainik'. When the publication of Akhand Jyoti started, he resolved to cooperate in a big way. He seemed to be enthusiastic to close his newsletter and fully get associated with Akhand Jyoti. Shiromani's family was quite rich and hence there was no worry of earning. Shriram did accept his offer but requested him to continue with his newsletter. His plea was: "Akahnd Jyoti is an experiment.

Nobody knows what shape it would take in future. If anything unpleasant happened, then the platform of 'Sahitya Sandesh' would also vanish.

The Company of Shiromaniji

Shiromaniji said – "It doesn't matter. If one has to fail, let the two of us get fail together. I have resolved to live and die with you." Shriram said –"Please wait for six months. During this period, the future of this magazine will be clear." He felt satisfied but said –"What do you mean? Till then will even a ray of Akhand Jyoti not be there in my destiny?" Shriram gave solution – "During this period, enroll new subscribers for this magazine. The more members we have, more will our family become strong."

Shiromaniji got engaged in making new members. By his lone effort, he made seventy new members. During this period, it was decided to change the place of publication. Shirmani's zeal was reduced slightly. He didn't become dull altogether – he was working for Akahnd Jyoti as usual; but he abandoned his stubbornness of renouncing everything and joining 'Akhand Jyoti'. He also helped Shriram in his shifting from Agra to Mathura. In order to search a house, he accompanied Shriram to Mathura three- four times.

Establishment in Vrij Dham

The first halt of 'Akhand Jyoti' at Mathura was in a lane near Holy Gate. At that time, that lane was unnamed. Long-long back, there used to live a Chaturvedi Brahman named Vallabhram. It is said that he fought bravely with the invaders who came to loot the temple of Dwarkadhish. He was slain in that encounter. So that lane was known by his name. The shape of the lane has now changed considerably. Even that house in which Shriram stayed has changed. The March 1941 issue of Akhand Jyoti was published from there. On *Pratipada* (the first day) of *Vikram Samwat* 1998, Shriram performed *Yagya* there. Religious, literary and social elites of Mathura attended that function.

Volunteers of Arya Samaj were also present. At that time, Mathura branch of Arya Samaj was split into two wings –Arya Samaj (Holy Gate) and Arya Samaj (Chauk). People of both the wings participated in the *yagya*. After the completion of *yagya*, Shriram gave a brief introduction of his plans. As soon as Shriram completed his address, Sri Satya Prakash Arya, the secretary of Arya Samaj (Holy Gate wing) raised his hand to convey that he wanted to say something; but he didn't wait for anybody's permission and started saying – "The thoughts of Shriram are very bright. If he accepts our request, then all our volunteers are ready to work with him. I wish to offer him the post of Chief of Arya Samaj (Holy Gate Wing).' Other members of that wing also supported him.

Invitation of Arya Samaj

Chauk wing of Arya Samaj too didn't waste time. Its secretary, Divyanand Arya, proposed Shriram as the leader of both the wings. In this proposal, there was a feeling of merger of both the factions. Satya Prakash Arya of Holy Gate wing said further – "Shriram's views regarding idol worship are against the basic principles of Arya Samaj. If he rectifies his views, then we will receive him with full honour." Divyanand also said something similar.

There were some scholars of Sanatan Dharma too. They tried to oppose the scholars of Arya Samaj. When only a few heated words had been exchanged between them, Shriram intervened. He said – "The question of accepting or not accepting the leadership of Arya Samaj does not arise now. Please spare me some time for giving a thought to it. At present, we have assembled here to celebrate *Pratipada* of the new *Samvatsa*r. From now on, 'Akhand Jyoti' will be published from Mathura. I humbly feel that we will be able to establish harmony in the Indian society through this medium. I am not in favour of solving the problems through confrontation. My appeal is for maintaining harmony. If possible, kindly cooperate with me in this endeavor."

After that, the issue of - handing over the responsibility of Arya Samaj and imposing the conditions – was pushed in the background. Shiromaniji also attended that program. He was busy in collecting the subscription of 'Akhand Jyoti' from the people present there. The same day Shriram started a new program of *Sadhana* during *Chaitra Navratra*. He proposed to the devotees present there that they should chant 12 *malas* (1 *mala* contains 108 beads) of Gayatri Mantra daily for nine days. Thus they would be able to complete a brief *anushthan* of 108 *malas* during *Navratra*. The *Purnahuti* (completion ritual) of this *anushthan* could be done on *Navami* (ninth day)

Thus Started the *Sadhana* Movement

This was a small beginning of the *Sadhana* movement, along with the publication of 'Akhand Jyoti' from Mathura. After addressing the gathering Shriram requested those *sadhaks* who were participating in that program to write their names. Seven *sadhaks* wrote their names. Among them four belonged to Arya Samaj. When the secretary of Holy Gate Arya Samaj noticed this, he objected and said – "Will you people do idol worship? Will you go against the principles of Swami Dayanand?"

Catching the point of objection, Shriram said – "Aryaji! These people don't have to do *japa* and *puja* in a *pauranic* way. I have requested to chant Gayatri Mantra. For that matter, even Swami Dayanandji Maharaj has stressed the need of chanting this mantra daily. In 'Satya Prakash', he has advised *sadhaks* to do *sandhya vandan* twice (in the morning and evening) daily. How can you consider their *sadhana* to be against the teachings of Swamiji? Rather, I would say that you should also do twelve *malas* of *japa* daily for the nine days."

The chief of Arya Samaj was not left with any ground for objection. He felt that he had developed a rigid attitude about idol worship and that he should get rid of it. Therefore, in order to clear that remorse, the chief also resolved to take up brief *anushthan* of nine days.

Nursing and Study

After coming to Mathura, Shriram's time was consumed mostly in managing the publication of 'Akhand Jyoti' and meeting the visitors. There was hardly any time left for the family. There was heavy work load on wife, Saraswati Devi, too. She was a traditional housewife. She hardly went out of the house. In fact she was always busy in her household chores and in arranging water, milk, *lassi*, etc for the visitors. She was getting tired with increased responsibilities and the new place. She needed rest in between the daily chores. Realizing this need, Shriram started sharing her work. In order to prevent Shriram from sharing her work, Saraswati Devi would continue working even when she needed rest. In the meantime she got infected with the recurring bouts of cough. The cough was quite severe. When Shriram heard that sound, he stopped everything and concentrated on her treatment. He kept a servant for house-hold chores.

When the doctor was consulted, it was diagnosed that her lungs were infected with tuberculosis. It was advised that she be admitted to hospital for treatment. At that time, there was no facility in Mathura for treatment of TB. But soon it was found that there was one good medical center in the nearby town of 'Hathras'. There were some relatives there, from whom some help could be expected. So in three-four days, Shriram made an arrangement to go to Hathras. Children were left with Taiji in Mathura. He himself took his wife to Hathras for treatment.

The treatment continued for nearly two months. They had to stay in the hospital for fifteen days. For the rest of the time, they had to visit the hospital in Hathras frequently. For whatever period, she was admitted in the hospital, Shriram was with her for almost all the time. He would go early in the morning and would remain by the bedside of his wife till late night. There was no space for a second person to stay there at night. So, at night, he used to stay with one of his relatives. The daily routine was fixed right on the first day. The bed-ridden wife, even in the hospital, was hesitant to take the services of Shriram. Shriram dispelled her hesitation by saying that the patient should follow the regimen prescribed by the doctor and the person who was attending to her. Ultimately she agreed. After that, Shriram would administer medicines himself, give her proper meals, change her clothes daily and get them washed. If some day washerman was not available, he would himself wash her clothes.

In spite of devoting himself fully to the nursing of his wife, Shriram was left with plenty of time. What to do in the spare time? After inquiring, it was found that there were two good libraries in the Tehsil.

As soon as he got free time, he went to the Panchayat's library, became its member and got issued some books. He would sit by the bedside of his wife. She would sleep and he would read books. He would stop reading when she was awake or when there was time for giving her the dose of medicines. When she was awake, he would talk to her. When she would get tired, he would again start reading. He also used to take notes while studying those books. In fifteen days, he read almost all important books of both the libraries. There were more than two thousand books in both the libraries.

After fifteen days, Saraswati Devi was relieved from the hospital. She was given sufficient medicines and was told about the precautions to be taken. They went back home. Shriram took great care of her health till she was fully recovered. It took about one year when she again took over the charge of her house-hold work.

Strange Objection

After sometime, Shriram hired another room in the same lane called 'Ballabhram ki gali'. This room was like a shop. There were big doors opening towards the roadside. He was planning to start an Ayurvedic dispensary in that room. Long back he had done practice of herbal medicines in Aanwalkheda too. When the neighbors came to know about his plan, they started opposing him. The reason was that on the way from Holy Gate to Dwarkadhish temple, there were three Ayurvedic dispensaries. Out of them two Vaidyas (Ayurvedic experts / physicians) were staying in the nearby lanes. In fact the opposition to Shriram's resolve started from these families. Later on, other people of the area also started opposing.

Shriram told those people, "I am starting this dispensary for the service of the ailing people. This is not for earning money or for competing with other dispensaries." This was also a fact. Indeed, neither Shriram had done any course / training in Ayurveda nor was there any one in the family who knew about health sciences. The idea was to heal minor ailments using herbs. When the neighbors resisted Shriram's plan, he tried to convince every one but they remained adamant. A message came from the families of Vaidyas that they would cooperate with Shriram, if he did some other business; but he must not open a dispensary. Every time it was made clear that he only wanted to help the poor in curing minor ailments and did not want anything in return; and that he would not treat any serious diseases; and that such patients would obviously go to reputed hospitals. This clarification was also not readily acceptable to any one.

Vaidyaji Met Taiji

One day Vaidya Bhagwandas came early in the morning to Shriram's residence. At that time he was engaged in *Upasana* (worship). He waited in the sitting room till the *Upasana* was complete. Taiji asked about his well-being. He told the aim of his visit and said that she should prevent his son from opening up a dispensary. Otherwise he (Vaidyaji) would be in great trouble.

Taiji said – "Vaidyaji why are you worrying? Shriram doesn't know even how to feel the pulse of a patient. He gives medicines only for simple ailments like cold-cough, boils-sores, stomach ache, etc. In fact, he tries to cure the patients through home remedies. Therefore, your business will not be affected."

Bhagwandas said "Behanji (sister)! You don't know. I know that Shriram's hands are miraculous. By virtue of the *punya* that he has earned by chanting mantras, even if he gives soil to the patient, he will be cured."

Taiji said – "Then what do you want? Should the patient not be cured?"

Bhagwandas said – "Certainly, they should Behanji! Your son should give blessings to the people but should not attempt any medical treatment."

When this talk was going on Shriram also came in that room after completing his *Upasana*. He had heard a few sentences of Vaidyaji. As a reply to him, Shriram said –"Vaidyaji! There is no miracle in my hands. Even if they have a miraculous healing power, I will not use it to cure patients. Please don't worry. Another thing; come what may, I am not going to change my decision. When I have resolved to serve the patients, I will abide by it. However, I promise that if I see the symptoms of some serious disease in any patient, I will send him to your dispensary. I will not allow him to sit idle without any medication." Even this promise could not satisfy Bhagwandas; so looking at Taiji, Shriram said – "OK, we will change this place, but allow me to serve for three months. After that, due to the change of place your words will be kept and the people will also not get the opportunity to say that you didn't allow a poor Brahman to stay here." Saying this Shriram laughed. Bhagwandas too started laughing. It appeared as if in that laughter, the knots of his mind opened.

After three months, as he promised to Vaidya Bhagwandas, Shriram left that house. He hired another house near Chauk. This house was about 500 meters from Ghiya Mandi (where these days the office of

Akhand Jyoti is located). The house was near the bank of Yamuna. One could easily see the flow of the river from its rooftop. Taiji liked it. Yamunaji and the temple of her favorite deity Dwarkadhish were very near. But soon this house appeared to be small as the readers of Akhand Jyoti started visiting very often. 'Gayatri Arogya Kendra' was also expanded. Eight –ten patients suffering from cold, cough, fever, etc started coming daily.

Saraswati Devi Passes Away

In May 1942, the family was struck with a heavy blow. Saraswati Devi suddenly fell sick. After the treatment in Hathras, she was quite healthy. There was no complaint of any pain, etc. She used to share all the tasks, from crushing the herbs for *yagya* and medicines to making the packets of Akhand Jyoti and labeling them. That day also she did everything. In the afternoon, there was slight pain in the abdomen, but the condition was not serious. By nature, she believed in natural healing; so she didn't discuss with anyone. After two days the pain increased. Even then she didn't tell. But Shriram noticed it from the expression of her face and behaviour. At that time also she refused to take any medicines.

In the afternoon her condition deteriorated. The children were silently observing their mother moaning with pain. When the condition didn't improve, Shriram called Vaidya Dhaniram. He was expert in diagnosing the disease simply by feeling the pulse of the patient. People used to say that he could tell the condition of the patient even by feeling the pulse of a person who brought the message. Anyway, Dhaniramji came. He observed the pulse of Saraswati Devi and said – "There is ulcer in her stomach and it may burst any time. Now there is no remedy except praying to God. Start preparing for the final rites."

As soon as Shriram heard these words, he was almost paralyzed. He became speechless. Taiji too was numbed and the condition of the children could be easily guessed. Observing the silence of grief before death in the family, Dhaniramji too got depressed. Shriam held him. He came out of the flood of grief and started taking care of Vaidyaji. Shriram said – "Kavirajji! Please don't get depressed like this. What will happen to us, if you grieve like this; and look at these children. It will tear their hearts. Please console them."

Saraswatiji got up in the night and said she wants to do *pranam* to Taiji. Immediately Taiji came in that room. She tried to get up to touch the feet of Taiji, but could not do so. Taiji came nearer. Saraswatiji timidly looked at Taiji and Shriram and said in low voice – "What can I advise you? But I wish to request humbly; please forgive me if there has been any unwitting misconduct on my part." Saying this she was silent for a moment, as if she was trying to gather courage to say something. After a pause, she said – "The children should not be deprived of motherly love and care. They need it direly." These were her last words.

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Soulmate and Collaborator in Life's Mission

Even earlier Shriram's mind was not very much engrossed in family affairs. He didn't neglect the familial responsibilities; but he also didn't worry too much about the family or cared too much for it. It may be said that he followed the middle path. He had neither too much attachment nor indifference towards the family. Wife's demise turned this tendency almost into detachment. After the completion of the final rites, Taiji could easily feel his mental state. Shriram's routine about meals, etc was extremely disciplined right from childhood. He didn't take anything other than bread of barley and cow's buttermilk. There was slight slackness in this regard during his participation in the freedom struggle. But that was only for a few years. Two years prior to the publication of 'Akhand Jyoti' he started following the same strict regimen. In essence, he was already living a life of an ascetic earlier too. After the demise of his wife (when he was 31), he talked less to the people. He appeared preoccupied all the time.

He was seen active in the *sadhana* of writing and social service as usual. But Taiji noticed some change in this field also. Earlier, when he met people, he used to talk humorously. His fun-filled talks and wit removed the sadness on the faces of patients. They would start laughing. Taiji observed that after the passing away of *Bahu* (daughter-in-law), Shriram almost stopped laughing and talking. He would remain silently engaged in his work. He would talk seriously with the guests. When the patients came to meet him, he would simply ask the symptoms; then give the medicines and send them back. The old patients also felt that sadness was overpowering Shriram. Some well-wishers even told this to Taiji.

Mother Understood the State of Mind

Taiji was observing this change very minutely. All the three children used to sleep with the grandmother. They were unable to mix with the father. Firstly, they were never in close proximity with the father; and secondly, the sudden departure of their mother made them virtually older than their age. They observed that father had to remain busy in Japa – Tapa, writing work, meeting visitors, etc; so he didn't have time for himself. Further they were very close to the heart of the grandmother right from the beginning. After the demise of wife, Shriram started looking after some minor household chores. Initially Taiji prevented him from doing all that. Shriram didn't say anything at that time, but when Taiji would go somewhere, he would wash his clothes as well as those of children and sometimes even that of Taiji. One day when he was washing clothes, Omprakash felt that his father was tired; so he went near him and said – 'Father, can I help you in washing?' Shriram stopped for a while and then said – 'You should concentrate on your studies, I will do it.' Omprakash might have been around ten-twelve years old at that time. He was insisting on helping again and again and Shriram was refusing each time. He also told Omprakash that his hands were small and hence he would not be able to handle bigger clothes; but the son's devotion to father made him insist further. On this, Shriram shouted at him. Omprakash started weeping and went to Taiji. The grandmother caressed and pacified him.

At around 10:30 in the night, Taiji sneaked into Shriram's room. She found that he was awake. Normally he would sleep between 8:30 – 9 PM, because he had to get up early in the morning. When Taiji saw him awake at that late hour, she was startled. She asked Shriam – 'Why are you awake? Why don't you sleep?' Shriram replied dejectedly. Taiji thought that he might be busy in some work, so he was awake till late night. She came inside his room and without any introduction said – 'You rebuked Om in the morning; this is not good.' Shriram said – 'He was getting stubborn. I only shouted at him'.

Taiji said –'He is worried about you. After the demise of Bahu you have been left alone. He might be realizing this suffering. Children are also without mother. This loneliness is also piercing them.' Shriram was listening to her silently. Taiji gave a lecture on her day-to day problems and the need of a person to take care of the home and then concluded like this "I have decided to bring another mother to the children."

Wish for New Daughter-in-law

Shriram smiled at the wisdom of Taiji. Had she said that she wants to get him married again, he would have perhaps refused. But it was difficult to deny the proposal of bringing a mother to the children. Even then, Shriram said –"I am not in favor of taking any new responsibility. I got married once, that is enough. Lord has shown me the way forward by making me alone." As soon as he said this, Taiji burst into anger. The doubt that she had in her mind, right from the beginning, about Shriram renouncing the world, suddenly got woken up. She said –"Let me also listen, what way has been shown! Will you become a *sanyasi* (ascetic) now? Will you break your promise to me and retire to the forest? What will happen to these children? What will happen to me?"

Taiji raised so many questions and scolded so much that Shriram simply listened dumbfounded. When she herself stopped for a while, Shriram said - "When did I say of becoming a *sanyasi*?"

"What will you do by keeping yourself alone?" – Said Taiji, "Am I not observing that you are withdrawing from life day by day? You are neither eating properly nor sleeping timely. You have almost forgotten to laugh and talk. No, this will not continue any more."

Shriram was unable to either refuse or accept this decision of Taiji. He had already made the outline of his future course of action. Accordingly, he had planned to go to his spiritual guide after the completion of *Mahapurashcharan Sadhana*. Whatever was to be done for the society in this period was also planned. After this incident, Taiji didn't waste time. She sent the message to her eldest son, Ramprasad Sharma, in Aanwalkheda, where he used to look after the agriculture and *Zamindari* work. (In fact, Ramprasad was the elder son of the first wife of Pt Roop Kishore Sharma, father of Shriram).

Shriram came to know about this message when his elder brother came to Mathura. At that time Shriram used to live in *Chuna-Kankad* ward. Ramprasadji reached there within three days after receiving the order from Taiji. He said – "Taiji! This is a matter of shame to me that you have to ask me; but I am not sitting idle. The marriage of Jagannath (Shriram's younger cousin) has been fixed to be solemnized in *Vaishakh* (May). Your *Bahu* (Ramprasad's wife) said that it would not be good to marry younger brother before rehabilitating the family of the elder brother. We are already concerned about it, so please don't worry."

Got Hints in *Sadhana*

It was the *Haveli* of Aanwalkheda, and some date of May 1943. Shriram was there. He was fully engrossed in *Japa-Dhyan*. His worship of five to six hours daily had made him radiant like a red hot gold. He used to feel this heat, when he would get up from his seat after the worship. When this state was being achieved, he felt a little inconvenient, but later he became habitual of it. In order to cool himself, he would wash his face, sprinkle water on his head and stand near Basil plant or the cow.

That day, when he was getting up from his seat after completing worship, he felt that he was not alone in the *Puja*–room. He felt the presence of another *sadhak*. When he tried to search in the vicinity, no one was found. Even then he was feeling the presence. This experience was repeated next day also. It appeared as if *Samarpana mantra* (the last mantra of dedicating the worship to the Lord) was simultaneously read by another person also. There appeared no sound but those vibrations could be easily felt.

On the third day, this experience became more distinct. It was felt that a lean and thin young girl was sitting near his seat. She was chanting the *samarpana mantra* with him and was offering water to mother earth after this resolve. In these three days, it was also realized that the burning heat, that used to be generated in the last lap of *sadhana*, almost vanished. 'Is it the effect of the presence of that girl?' – Shriram's mind questioned. But this thought didn't stay for long.

Same day elder brother Ramprasad came to Mathura. As soon as he entered the house, he called Taiji and announced – "He has found a match for Shriram. She possesses virtuous conduct and noble character. She doesn't like playing much. However, she enjoys feeding birds and animals like cow, dog, goat, etc; and serving the guests visiting the home." Describing all this, Ramprasad started laughing. Taiji said – "Will you tell the name and address also? Have you inquired about the home and family?"

Found Second Soulmate

"Everything has been inquired into Taiji! You will not refuse. Now prepare for the engagement." – Saying this Ramprasad again started laughing. Then he began describing about the would-be mother of the children. "The bride's name is Bhagwati Devi. She is the daughter of Sri Jaswant Rai Bohare who belongs to Sanwaria Bohare family of Agra. She is about sixteen-seventeen years old. She is dark complexioned and is lean and thin. She is the fourth child of her father, and spends most of her time in worship. She started worshipping Lord Shiva at the age five. One day, early in the morning she went to the temple of Lord Shiva located in the premises of the home itself. Sitting in front of the idol of the Lord, she started chanting *Panchakshari Mantra (Namah Shivay)* without being taught by anyone. After sometime she gazed at the rising Sun and offered it *Arghya* (water kept in a pot during worship)."

Talks of Bride Coming Home

Taiji was very much satisfied when she came to know that Bhagwati Devi is religious by nature. She was getting worried after Shriram was left alone; now a solution had been found. Her son was tending more towards hard ascetic life; so her worry was that if this tendency increased, he might become a *sadhu - sanyasi*. After knowing the devotion of Bhagwati Devi, she was assured that it would keep in balance the tendencies of asceticism and pursuit of spiritual knowledge in Shriram.

Ramprasadji told about the bride, 'She also takes care of the cows in the house. One *Shyama* (black complexioned) cow is so near to her that she (cow) takes her food / water only by her hands. If some morning she is late, then the cow starts bellowing. It appears as if she is calling her'

Ramprasadji further told that everyone in the home called Bhagwati Devi as Lali. She was the youngest child. When she was five years old, her mother expired. All her brothers and sisters took great care of her. Father too cared for her so much that she never felt that she was lacking mother's love. Ramprasad then laughingly told – "And listen Taiji! Your would-be daughter-in-law didn't have any interest in playing in childhood. Panditji was telling that Lali had one doll of cloth. It fell sick very often and Lali would get engaged in nursing her. She would start worrying if the hands or legs of the doll got even slightly distorted or its cloth became dirty. She would take care of it like that of a sick person. One 'Vaidyaji' used to be called. 'Vaidyaji' was also a doll of cloth. He would come, feel the pulse, and tell some herbal remedy. Lali would collect the herbs, pound them and prepare an extract and then apply it to the doll. In this treatment, the doll would become slightly dirty. Therefore, after the treatment was over, she would give bath to the doll and change her clothes."

Taiji couldn't stop laughing when it was told that her would-be daughter-in-law had made a separate kitchen for her doll, where her meals were prepared. Other visitors (dolls) used to come to meet her doll. Their lunch / dinner were also prepared in that kitchen. No guest was allowed to go without taking food.

Engagement Done

Taiji was glad to know the virtues of the bride. Without meeting the bride or inquiring anything about her family, she approved of the relation. In order to fix the marriage, Jaswant Raiji came only once. He didn't ask in the neighborhood or anybody else about the bridegroom. He only matched the horoscopes. After matching, he said – "They will make an excellent couple – like Shiva and Parvati – such is the planetary position in the horoscopes."

Engagement was done; and *Phalgun saptami samvat* 2000 (March 10, 1944) was fixed as the wedding day. Same day it was also decided that Lali's pet *Shyama* cow would also accompany her. *Kanyadhan* (daughter) and *Godhan* (cow), both, would be bid farewell from Agra. It was made clear that the marriage ceremony should be very simple.

Indeed, the marriage was performed with utmost simplicity. Shriram accepted only two *Kurtas* and two *Dhotis* of *Khadi* as dowry. For the bride also they accepted only cow. When the parents of the bride insisted to give some wealth in dowry, it was politely refused. In the Barat (marriage party), there were four people, apart from Taiji. The *Sanskar* (marriage function) was done like a family festival. When the bride came to Mathura, a *Gayatri Yagya* was performed, in which friends of Shriram also participated.

She Became Dear to All

Soon after the arrival, the bride easily adapted to the atmosphere of the new home. Though it was hardly two – three days after her arrival there, but it appeared as if she had been living in those surroundings for years. Initially the children were distancing themselves. In fact, non-acquaintance was the only hitch; otherwise they used to glance at their new mother from here and there. One day Taiji caught hold of the children and sent them forcibly to the bride. She was sitting on the mat in the courtyard of the house. She was busy in some household work. Taiji first sent Omprakash and then Daya and Shraddha. All the three children came near but stood there in shyness. Taiji was watching from the room. When she saw that the children are standing quietly, she said – "Omprakash! What are you observing, touch her feet."

Listening to her imposing voice, Omprakash moved forward and touched the feet of bride. *Bahurani* (bride) held the hands of Omprakash, Daya and Shraddha and asked them to sit near her. She caressed all the three and asked their names, about their studies, etc. Out of curiosity, children too asked some questions. Later on they forgot what they asked each other. However, the children did remember Taiji's words; she had seriously advised them to call the bride as '*Maa*' (mother).

It so happened that the children called the bride as *Chachi* (meaning - aunt). They also used to call their mother by this title. Taiji shouted and said – "Now you are grown up children. Stop saying *Chacha – chachi* and address properly." The children used to address their father also as *Chacha* (meaning – uncle). In fact other children of the family called Shriram as *Chacha*, and hence they also started calling him *Chacha*. When Shriram was married again, Taiji made the correction in their addressing the family members and asked the children to call Shriram as '*Pitaji*' (father).

Bhagwati Devi, after caressing the children, said – "Now onwards don't cause trouble to Taiji. Just tell me whatever you want, ok."
Omprakash said – "I never troubled her" Daya said – "If I wanted anything, I used to insist. I think, insisting is not troubling *Maa*!" Shraddha was silently standing. Daya's childish expression brought a smile on the face of the new mother.

From that day onwards, Omprakash slept with his grandmother and Daya and Shraddha with *Maa*. Whatever was required, they asked only from *Maa*. The needs of roaming here and there or playing were taken care of by *Dadi* (grandmother, Taiji). The responsibilities of *Dadi* and *Maa* were not divided. Both could share each other's work, but the children reduced the burden of heavy work on *Dadi*. They understood that they should not make *Dadi* tired. After a few days, they got so much mixed up with their new mother that she appeared to be an old acquaintance; as if she had given birth to them.

Affection for All

Bhagwati Devi not only took the responsibility of the children but also that of '*Akhand Jyoti*' and of the guests visiting the family. Right from day one, it appeared that the home, the family and its members were well known. Taiji formally explained the arrangements and the needs of the home. There was no need to ask again whatever was explained. The homework began with upkeep and maintenance of

'*Akhand Deepak*'. This was the first task of the house-hold chores. She met children after that; and met Shriram even after that.

According to the tradition in that area prevailing at that time, the bride and bridegroom didn't see each other prior to marriage. The bride could not meet him for a few days even after marriage. She could only side-glance her soulmate during *Yagya* or *Puja-Path*. When she first met him, she only felt that Shriram was not only her husband but her *Aaradhya* (deity of worship / devotion). It appeared as if she got Lord Shiva in physical form, whom she had been worshipping from her childhood.

Message of *Aaradhya*

In the first meeting itself, Shriram said, "You have to take the responsibility of the mother of these children. Other children will also call you *Maa*."

Bhagwati Devi, expressing dilemma, started looking at the face of Shriram. It appeared as if she was asking what he meant by this. Whatever Shriram said was not a planned talk. It came out spontaneously from his mouth. He said – "In future, we have to reach thousands of people. They too will come searching us. You have to give your affection to all of them like a mother."

Bhagwati Devi was looking at the face of her *Aaradhya* in wonder. For the time she was standing agape, she felt that her husband was not an ordinary person but a light-bearer. She didn't say anything, only realized and repeated in her heart – 'You are not only my husband, soulmate, and life-companion but also my Guru. *Gurudev-Gurudev–Parabrahma*.' With the inrush of these feelings, she started chanting mentally the prayer of Lord Shiva – '*Namamishamishan Nirvanroopam*'. She used to sing this prayer in her daily worship. She offered this prayer at the feet of Shriram. This offering was not the one prescribed according to *yoga, gyan, karma, vidya* or *bhakti* but was done purely on the basis of *samarpana* (humble surrender).

The Beginning of Public Contact

The house at *Chuna-Kankad* (ward of Mathura) was appearing to be small as the members of Akhand Jyoti family were increasing. Many curious people also started coming. When the people participating in Shriram's *Yagya*–campaign and other programs had any doubts regarding any subject, whether private or public, they would unhesitatingly come to Shriram for solution. Shriram, while conducting the *yagya,* would give its message that while offering *ahutis* (oblations) in the fire of *yagya*, one should also offer *ahutis* of one's evil traits and resolve to take up some aspect of selfless service. The more one does in this direction, more *punya* (spiritual merit) he earns.

When Shriram used to be away from home, Taiji would take care of the visitors. But soon she realized that sitting for public contact and guidance was not in tune with her nature. She was more inclined to remain engrossed in the adoration of the Lord. So she freed herself gradually from this responsibility and brought forward her *Bahu* (daughter-in-law), Bahgwati Devi. When *Bahu* hesitated, Taiji and then Shriram too explained to her – 'In the coming days more and more suffering people will visit our home; and then it is you who will have to take care of them'. She hesitatingly agreed for the public contact and that too only in the absence of Shriram.

When the number of visitors increased, the need for a bigger house was felt. Shriram came to know that there was a double-storeyed Haveli having twelve rooms in the Dampier Park. The monthly rent of that house was rupees eight. From the point of view of openness and future expansion it was quite good. When Shriram went there, the neighbors told him that there was a legal dispute over that house between two families. Whenever any one of them had tried to sell or hire it, quarrel used to start. Then he searched some other houses. Finally, he settled for the house at Ghiya Mandi. There were nine rooms in it. The house was double-storeyed. This house, located by the road side, continues to be the office of 'Akhand Jyoti' (monthly magazine) to this day. The space was sufficient. Once the rent was fixed, 'Akhand Deepak' and the photo of Mother Gayatri were established on the ground floor. About forty people attended the house- warming ceremony.

Challenge in the New House

When Shriram was enthusiastically exploring the possibility of hiring this house, the neighbors warned him that the house had been vacant for several months. Even if someone came there, he didn't stay for long. It was said that evil spirits haunted that house. From their point of view, they were giving the right advice not to reside there; but Shriram said 'If the evil spirits are haunting, let them be there; I will not have any inconvenience due to them; I will befriend them.'

The people listening to this answer thought that Shriram was making fun of them, though it was not so. Shriram made his point clear – "We are *sadhaks* and devotees of Gayatri; therefore we don't keep any malice or enmity towards anyone." He narrated the story of Madhavacharya: "Swami Madhavacharya did the *sadhana* of Gayatri for twelve years. He did *Japa- Tapa, Vrat- Anushthan*, everything sincerely, but no visible benefit was observed. He felt that there was no improvement in physical, mental or spiritual levels. He was very much disappointed. In order to achieve quick success in *sadhana*, a famous *Tantrik* Balyogi advised Madhavacharya to worship Lord Bhairav. Madhavacharya had a great fancy for attaining *Siddhis* (supernatural powers). He started worshipping Lord Bhairav. In just forty days, he could see the results of new *sadhana*. He heard the voice of Lord Bhairav – 'Ask for a boon'. Madhavacharya opened the eyes to see him. But he could not be seen. The Acharya said – 'Please give me your *darshan* (view)'. Bhairav replied – 'You have done *sadhana* of Gayatri. I cannot appear before Gayatri *Sadhak*. I cannot face the effulgence of Gayatri *sadhana*.' Madhavacharya asked – 'But I have never felt the benefit of Gayatri *Upasana*'. Bhairav explained –"Your *Upasana* has annulled the results of sins accumulated in past lives. When the stage of getting the spiritual benefits arrived, you left that path. Though you have left that *sadhana,* its effulgence will always be with you." The aim of this narration was to remove the worry of the neighbors.

Gambol of Ghosts

After two-three days, it appeared in the night that there was brouhaha on the terrace. The sound of people running around was heard, as if they were loitering or playing Kabaddi. Shriram took a lighted lantern in one hand and a stick in the other and went upstairs. When he searched there, no one was found. He also looked on the nearby other terraces. Then he came down. After sometime there was again the same noise. Taiji said – "Shriram! It would have been better had we learnt from others' lessons and not come here. These are the evil spirits who are causing noise. Now we should search for a new house." After a pause, she said – "Tell the concerned people right in the morning."

As soon as Taiji completed her talk, there was uproar in the upstairs, as if in the joy of victory many people started shouting. Shriram said – "We should not accept our defeat like this, otherwise what will Thakurji and Mother Gayatri say!" Taiji didn't reply. She kept silence. There were intermittent noises upstairs. Shriram got up saying –'I too will have to sit upstairs. Let me see who is annoyed with us.'

Taking the lantern and a stick in his hands, he again went upstairs. From the door he said in a loud voice – "Listen! Whosoever you are, we have no fear at all. If you want to live here, you can do so gladly but don't create trouble. We will not disturb you, but will also not tolerate your commotion."

Peace Restored

No answer came from any direction. Shriram unfolded his mat and sat on it. There was dead silence all over. Shriram heard a very light sound of footsteps, as if someone was approaching him slowly. He saw in that direction. No one was seen, but the footsteps were still heard. Shriram was staring constantly in that direction. It appeared that someone came very near, but soon it was felt that the (invisible) person had changed his mind and retreating footsteps were heard.

Shriram remained seated as usual. After ten-fifteen minutes, Taiji's voice was heard; she was calling him downstairs. Shriram got up and said – "If you accept my advice, then do not create trouble; live peacefully. I will try for your salvation; pray to Mother Gayatri and perform *Yagya –anushthan*, so that you get peace. If you expect something else from us, we are ready to do it, but do not create commotion." Saying this, Shriram went downstairs. After that day, there was no disturbance. The next *Poornima* (full moon day), Shriram performed *Yagya* for the peace of those tormented spirits on the same terrace. Neighbors were surprised to watch all the drama.

The Test of Affection – Resolve

Those days the world was suffering from the horrors of World War II, which was causing colossal misery – death and destruction – all over the world for last six years. Several industries / factories had closed down. The press located on Vrindavan road, in which 'Akhand Jyoti' used to be printed, also closed down. Prior to this, they faced the shortage of printing paper. Somehow, they managed to get the paper, but the printing was difficult to manage. At that time there were twenty two printing presses in Mathura. Out of them eighteen had closed down. It was becoming difficult to get 'Akhand Jyoti' printed.

'Whatever be the means required, the magazine must come out in time' – Shriram told confidently, while discussing the problems of home and family with his wife. He said further, "Akhand Jyoti is not only a magazine printed on paper, but it is the light of 'Akhand Deepak' lit in our Puja –room. Like the Deepak the flame of 'Akhand Jyoti' must also be kept lighted uninterruptedly."

"We are following the religion of love and affection" – said Mataji. (By that time, not only the children of neighbors, but also the people visiting the office of Akhand Jyoti started calling Bhagwati Devi as 'Mataji' (mother)). She said – "You have given me the responsibility of keeping the affection (oil) full in Akhand Deepak. Now let me also worry about Akhand Jyoti." Saying this Mataji got up and took out the jewelry box from the Almirah. Keeping it in front of Shriram, she said – "These jewels should be enough for starting a small press. Please keep them as pawn with the pawn-broker. We can use that money. In future, when we earn enough money, we will get them back."

'Akhand Jyoti' – Mother's Love and Affection

Shriram was wonderstruck by this initiative of Mataji. There was no scope for saying 'no' to the proposal. Plan was made then and there-'A hand – operated machine should be purchased. If a small treadle machine is available within the limited budget, that can also be purchased and the magazine should be published in time.' In the same meeting of planning and taking the decision, Shriram told Mataji – 'Your gesture is superbly in accord with your title (Mataji) – taking up the responsibility of distributing love and affection in the *Puja*-room and in *Gyan Yagya* too.'

After a close search, one small Indian treadle machine was arranged for rupees ninety. In normal days, its cost would have been around rupees four hundred. Whatever amount of money was needed, it was made available on loan. The machine was fixed in one of the rooms of the office of Akhand Jyoti, located on the ground floor. The work was to be started immediately. So an employee, named Abdul, was hired as machine-man. Prior to printing the first page, coconut was broken. A *tilak* was applied on the forehead of Abdul and *kalawa* was tied in his right hand. As a *shagun* (auspicious gift), he was given a copper coin. Then he printed the first page. On that occasion, only twelve persons were present. One of them said – 'It's a courageous deed. In these times of economic depression, people are winding up businesses. Shriram has begun a new venture.'

Shriram heard this. Even if he had not heard, he was about to say – "It is Mataji's courage and conviction which has made manifest this venture. 'Akhand Jyoti' is Mataji's personified love and affection." From that day upto the publication of Akhand Jyoti on due date, Shriram told this incident to many people on different occasions. It was also mentioned in '*Gayatri Charcha*' and the editorial (*Apno se apni bat*) of 'Akhand Jyoti'.

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Future Calling

An office of 'Akhand Jyoti' was opened in a separate room and a wooden chair and table were kept in it. One old freedom fighter, named Bhoodev Sharma, used to keep the accounts as well as take care of the correspondence. The list of subscribers of Akhand Jyoti magazine was maintained in one register. The number of subscribers exceeded one thousand. The accounts were maintained in another register. Bhoodev Sharma also had a seat in that room. Normally Shriram would sit on a mat on the ground in a room adjacent to *Puja*-room. He would keep a *chauki* (a low rectangular stool) in front of him. On the right side, there would be some books for study. The visitors used to meet him in the same room. He would keep himself busy in writing and study. When the number of visitors started increasing, he fixed the time for meeting people to be after 2 PM. Before that he would be busy in reading-writing or correspondence. If he had to go out for some urgent work, he would do that before 2 PM. He was normally available in his chamber after 2 PM. This chamber later on came to be known as *Paramarsh Kaksha* (counseling room).

By the year 1946, the printing and publication of Akhand Jyoti became a matter of regular routine. In the meantime some special issues were also published. The loan that was taken for this purpose had also been repaid. The activities that were started for distributing literature and making public contacts were giving satisfactory results after some initial hurdles. In the meantime, a sudden controversy arose.

At that time, Shriram was chief of the Mathura branch of Arya Samaj. A few months back, there was an argument over idol-worship in Chauk. The volunteers of Arya Samaj wanted to make Shriram *Pradhan* (Head) of their branch at Mathura, but they were insisting that he should give up the idol worship of Gayatri. Shriram refused to accept their demand. Then they withdrew their objection and made Shriram 'Pradhan' of Arya Samaj. When the popularity of Akhand Jyoti started spreading and the devotees started gathering around Shriram, the same volunteers again raised their objection. In the Sunday – *Yagyas*, first they started murmuring in subdued tones, but later they talked openly. These discussions reached the ears of Shriram too. He preferred to wait rather than confronting them. Ultimately, one day a team of volunteers of Arya Samaj reached the office of Akhand Jyoti.

A team of four-five volunteers of Arya Samaj under the leadership of Dwarka Prasad approached Shriram and without any introduction said – 'Either you abandon the propagation of *Gayatri Puja* or vacate the post of *Pradhan* of Arya Samaj.' Shriram humbly replied– "I don't know by what authority you have come here to discuss all this. Had Arya Samaj been your local organization, I would have taken the decision right now; but it is not so. This organization is a familial-spiritual gathering of thousands of people. I will not deviate from any responsibility of the Samaj without making clear my point of view."

"The thoughts of Swami Dayanand are very clear regarding idol-worship. There is no need of giving any clarification in that regard.' – Said Dwarka Babu. Shriram replied – "I consider that had I put forth my viewpoint in front of Swami Dayanand, perhaps he would have also modified his stand in this respect."

Dwarka Babu and other volunteers who accompanied him started laughing. In fact, they were trying to make fun of Shriram. One fellow even told – "Are you a scholar and saint superior to Swami Dayanand?"

'No', said Shriram – "I am a small child in front of him, but I am sitting on his shoulders. I am telling you most humbly that by virtue of being on his shoulders I am able to see a more distant future than him"

Meeting of the Samaj

The same volunteer said – "What are you foreseeing?" Instead of replying, Shriram said – "I will elaborate my thoughts in front of the members of Samaj and also let you know my decision." The team of representatives went back. At one week's notice, a meeting was called in the Chauk office of Arya Smaj. Probably, the date was 16th March 1946. About sixty volunteers attended the meeting. The agenda of meeting was already known, so the volunteers came prepared. Some people were against Shriram, while others were with him. They were realizing that Shriam was able to reach a wider cross-section of society through idol-worship, but they had no argument in their favor. They were almost forced to keep their mouths shut due to being followers of Swami Dayanand.

The beginning of the meeting was uproarious. One of the volunteers who had met Shriram last week said – "This gentleman considers himself to be superior to Swami Dayananad; to be sitting on his shoulders. He should be severely reprimanded. I am proposing a defamation motion against him."

Some volunteers started hooting. Veersingh, *Mantri* (secretary) of the Samaj, said – "Let us allow Shriram to put forward his viewpoint. Please keep quiet." *Mantri* and other senior volunteers had to strive hard to pacify the agitated members. When a semblance of calm was restored, Veersingh asked – "Shriramji! Is the matter on which the members are agitated, true? Did you talk something indecent about Swami Dayanand?"

"If a child sitting on the shoulders of the guardian and due to this, talks of being able to see distant things, is considered indecent; then I am guilty." – Shriram said in a high-pitched voice – 'What I said was that had Swami Dayanand listened to my views, perhaps he too would have agreed with me." After that Shriram narrated the whole story of the last week. Now the members who were noisy started stealing their eyes. Dwarka Babu got up and said – "Please clarify your views regarding idol-worship and let us know your decision about the headship."

Expounded His Viewpoint

The essence of whatever Shriram said is as follows: "Ninety to ninety five percent Hindus believe in idol worship. If you denounce their faith, you will be hurting them. You will also be expelling them from the Vedic tradition. No forum can survive by disrespecting its followers. If we remain very rigid against idol-worship, we will not be able to progress. Whosoever wants to believe in idol-worship, let them do it; those who don't want, let them not."

"Swami Dayanand established a principle. Why should we go against it?" – Asked one volunteer. Shriram said – "We should also think what the reasons for establishing that principle were. Swami Dayanand has been such a saint - great man who has given more importance to logic and discernment than faith-devotion. I personally consider that Swamiji opposed hypocrisy, deceit and fraud in the name of idol worship and in the shadow of temples. His opposition was so strong that people doing business of *Puja* and temples got enraged. They started indulging in false reasoning. The result was that it left no space for discernment. Our elite society got lost in the dark dungeon."

End of Unpleasant Controversy

Shriram was trying to convey – "For general believing public, idol is a helpful medium. Through this medium, people can imbibe spiritual virtues. If it is removed, the possibility of self-refinement will vanish for 90-95% people. In fact, the expansion of Arya Samaj has been halted because the feelings of normal people do not get nourished by it. This has happened due to the rigid attitude of the Arya Samaj leaders and volunteers."

Shriram was continuously speaking. The members of the Samaj were listening to him attentively. Their opposition to idol-worship seemed to be softening. At the end, Shriram said – "So far as my decision (regarding headship) is concerned, let those friends decide who made me *Pradhan*. I have written my decision on this paper; but I would like the matter to be put to a vote on whether I should continue or relinquish my post. The feelings of the friends will be known. I request that this paper, in which I have written my feelings, be opened only after voting."

The voting was done. Out of the sixty members, forty eight raised their hands in favor of Shriram and twenty two against him. Veersingh declared Shriram the winner. After this declaration, he also advised that as far as possible one should avoid raising disputable points regarding the basic the principles of Arya Samaj.

Shriram repeated his request to read his paper and make his decision known to the members. Shriram had written in that paper – "I consider myself an humble student and a *sadhak* of *Sanatan Dharma*, which has neither beginning nor end. There was possibility of my profiting from the clear-sighted and discerning approach to spirituality inherent in Arya Samaj. I thought, I would thus be better able to serve our culture and tradition. During the short duration of my formal association with you, I realize that it is difficult. Therefore, I have decided to tread my separate path. By sticking to the headship, I don not want to create inconvenience to my friends. I request you to kindly relieve me."

This was the declaration of resignation from the post of *Pradhan*. After that Shriram concluded –"We will remain together in *sadhana* and *samar* (freedom struggle). In the programs, where we can work together, all my friends and well-wishers are cordially invited."

The Difficult Road to Independence

After the end of Second World War in May 1945, for about one year, the country witnessed several upheavals. In Britain, a new government was formed by the Labour Party. That government made up its mind to remove British Rule from India. Shimla Conference was abruptly dissolved due to the intransigence of the Muslim League leader, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Out of the total number of members in the governing council, he was insisting on getting more than half of them from the Muslim League.

The way the political events of the country had unfolded over the last two – three years, it became clear that the partition of India was almost inevitable. The failure of Shimla Conference put the seal on it. The communal harmony was getting wilfully disrupted. The post-war conditions, British politics and the wrangles for participation in the governing body had filled the public with uncontrollable anger and dissatisfaction. The stage was reached where even small pretexts were enough for creating violent riots. In the beginning of the year 1946, a Muslim officer of Azad Hind Fauz was court-martialed. He was sentenced by an army court. The Muslims of Calcutta (now Kolkata) took out a procession against this decision. Soon the procession became violent and started looting the shops, burning trams and even killing some innocent people.

Some incidents of revolt in the army and security network too came to light. There was dissatisfaction in the police, too. The employees of Bombay dock yard went on strike. Gandhiji held World War responsible for this turmoil. Normally after the war, for sometime there are always chances of moral degradation and disorder. Apart from this, conspiracies were being plotted to intensify tensions between

Hindus and Muslims. In March 1946, a team of three cabinet ministers of the British Government came to India. In about four months, this team interacted with about five hundred leaders of India.

The purpose of these meetings was to prepare the ground for independence of India and also to decide about the orm of government for transfer of power. According to the plan that the Cabinet Mission submitted in May 1946, India was to be given a federal rule. The federal government that was to be formed by combining the princely states and the representatives of the provinces was to be given the responsibility of foreign affairs, security, home and transport. Rest of the departments were to be looked after by the state governments.

Communal Tension Started Building Up

Although all the political parties and the princely states accepted the formula of the Cabinet Mission, the thinking of Muslim League was different. They wanted a separate independent state for Muslim majority areas, implying a partition of the country. Though they had accepted the plan of the Cabinet Mission in May 1946 but within ten weeks they withdrew their support. The League declared a 'Direct Action' movement for creation of Pakistan. With this declaration, a conflagration of hate, tension and violence erupted all over India. In order to perform his duty in this riot torn atmosphere, Shriram called a meeting of scholars, pandits, and social workers of Mathura. He himself went to invite these people to the meeting. Exactly twelve days after the declaration of 'direct action', seven religious leaders of Mathura attended a meeting at the residence of Shriram in Ghiya Mandi. Among them three were Hindus, two Muslims, one Christian and one Sikh. Among the Hindus, one person was from Arya Smaj.

Salim Mohammad, the Imam of the mosque of Chhatta Bazar, was requested to preside over the meeting. He looked at Maulana Farukhi. After a little deliberation, almost every one was looking at Dwarka Babu of Arya Samaj to take the lead. The following guidelines were framed in the meeting to maintain communal harmony in Mathura: "Howsoever inflammatory talks political leaders give, the people of our communities should resolve to maintain peace and harmony. After Puja, Prayers or Namaz, some selected portions of the respective religious texts should be read. These portions should be such that they teach peace, harmony and brotherhood. In our offices, homes, or workplaces, we should employ at least one person who is from a different community. For example, a Hindu religious leader should keep one Muslim with him and a Muslim leader should give employment to one Hindu.

"Abdul is already with you from the beginning. So you need not do anything especially for this purpose." – said Dwarka Babu. Shriram said – "I have resolved to publish the messages of different religions in my magazine."

He also made the members aware of his decision of publication, in future, of the literature inspiring communal harmony. He also requested for the cooperation of visiting scholars in this direction. The third important decision that was taken in the meeting was that all concerned should ensure that there were no riots. If, by chance, something happened, all attempts should be made to save the innocent people irrespective of their religion; this would increase the willpower of the victims of riots.

During 'Direct Action' movement of Muslim League there were demonstrations in Mathura also. Bloody violence erupted in Bengal, Bihar and Punjab. Its news spread like wildfire all over the country; and due to this, tension was building up in other cities which were earlier peaceful. Under this movement, there were demonstrations and public meetings in Mathura also. Within one year, there were about fifteen instances in which both the communities violently clashed with each other. The freedom fighters of Mathura district made a '*Shantisena*' (peace-keeping force). Its volunteers used to take out *Prabhat Pheris* (morning processions). They would sing prayers that used to be sung in the Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi. The credit of chanting the melody of '*Raghupati raghav rajaram*' in Mathura goes to these volunteers. Shriram too would participate in these *prabhat pheris*. He also inspired the readers of Akhand Jyoti to participate in these peace marches.

After the final décisions of partition of India and grant of independence to two partitioned states – India (Bharat) and Pakistan - the minorities in the two nation-states started becoming victims of communal violence. Violence flared up in West Punjab, Sindh and East Bengal. In those states, the non-Muslim minorities started fleeing from their ancestral homelands. Hindus were fleeing away from West Punjab and Sindh and Muslims from East Bengal. The rioters made fleeing people their targets. The news of riots reached other parts of the country and families of minority community there started packing up. In Mathura, some Muslim families sold their properties overnight and decided to go to Pakistan. Some of them had planned to go just because it was an Islamic country and hence they would get better opportunities there. When Shriram heard this news, he along with his religious team contacted these families and tried to persuade them to stay back. Out of the twenty families, fourteen changed their decision.

In those days of tension–filled atmosphere, some religious places of Mathura also became the victims of violence. Though it was the duty of police to maintain law and order and protect them but the police force was not enough. The neighboring cities of Mathura, namely Agra and Bharatpur, were also burning. Shantisenas were formed there also for maintaining harmony. Shriram was asked to visit these places. On some occasions, hedid so, but mostly he remained in Mathura as he was more needed there.

The plot of some trouble–makers to attack some religious places in Chauk and Keshavdev (wards) was leaked. In order to prevent the planned attacks, Shriram along with his friends and volunteers went to Keshavdev ward. However, police didn't allow them to do so. So the volunteers decided to individually visit the families of minority community. In those turbulent times of deep distrust, it was but natural to disbelieve the people of the other community by the residents. In those areas, the news was spread that Hindus were coming there. But in the next wave, it became clear that they were volunteers of *Shantisena* and that among them Shriram and his companions were also present. This information removed the worry of the Muslim residents of Katara. The rioters tried their best but they could not do much harm. Some people were arrested. The feeling of insecurity and tension was still prevailing. So Shriram made it a routine to visit those areas daily for nearly one and half months. He would meet the people and inquire about their apprehensions. He would normally be accompanied by some other volunteers and leaders of Congress. The aim of keeping in touch with them was to lift up their morale.

The Festivities Mixed with Challenges

India got independence on 15th August, 1947. This was celebrated as a festival in Mathura too. Shriram performed a special *Yagya* at his residence and hoisted the Tricolor Flag on the main entrance. After that he also participated in the program held at the collectorate. Later on, he went to Katara Keshavdev. He was accompanied by Shyamlal - his close friend and a social worker of that region. Families residing in Katara, too, appeared happy in a subdued way. Their minds were filled with worry and doubt. Shriram told these people – "If you people fear too much, you can come to my house. People of your community are working in my press. You can live there for whatever duration you wish, don't get frightened."

On this assurance two families indeed got ready. Shriram told them to wait till evening. Then he vacated two rooms in his house and took them with him next day. There was not much luggage with them that required any vehicle. They just made a bundle of necessary items and accompanied him. Mataji welcomed them; their food was cooked in her kitchen. They stayed there for two weeks. After normalcy was restored in that region, they went back on their own.

Due to the riots, there was a serious concern about employment / work in the minority community. People simply stopped giving work to them. Wherever they worked, people looked at them suspiciously. In some places, their services were terminated. Some such families came to Shriram to solve their problems. Shriram met the employers and tried to convince them. Obviously their doubt was not unfounded. It was not due to the nature or conduct of the workers, but on account of mutual communal mistrust.

After convincing the proprietors, some of them re-employed the workers, but what should be done to bridge the gulf of distrust? The volunteers of *Shantidal* decided to form a cooperative society, collect some money and start a small-scale industry. The vocations like weaving, painting, preparation of spices, soap making, machine repairs, etc were chosen. Not much capital was required for this venture. The requisite amount was arranged through donations by the rich people and by the volunteers. The society started functioning from October 1947. In this manner, the society was able to give jobs to forty families. After manufacturing the goods, they supplied them to the market and also to some individual homes. Initially there were some problems but later on it was felt that this kind of work was much better than the previous jobs. It was their business and was giving more profit. Therefore the workers were also happy. The society remained active for many years.

Social activity earned Shriram popular affection and gratitude. In the period from March to December 1947, Shriram organized thirty five programs of *Gayatri Yagya* in Mathura. About five thousand people attended these *yagyas*. In these programs, Shriram's message used to be that the true *yagya* should be performed within the inner-self. Had he not given the right message of religiosity in these programs, Mathura would have witnessed veritable communal turmoil.

A National Tragedy

On 30th January, 1948 an insane person murdered Mahatma Gandhi. The news shook the entire nation and whole world. The words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru – 'That flame has extinguished' –appeared to be the scream of the soul of the entire nation. Fortunately, that mad man was from Hindu community. What would have happened had that person belonged to the minority community? It is nerve-shattering even to imagine that situation.

Shriram kept fast on 31st January. During *Mahapurashcharan Sadhana*, he was already taking meals only once daily. Shriram held entire society responsible for the murder of Mahatma Gandhi. The fast was for the atonement of that sin. He didn't take anything for two more days. Some religious and political leaders also participated in that fast. Apart from the members of the committee (formed in the previous year) for maintaining communal harmony and good will, the volunteers of the Congress and some citizens also undertook a one-day fast. Shriram broke the fast at the end of the third day. That day more than one hundred people were present; and their gloomy faces were amply demonstrating that the remorse of the poison of communal riots that was spread in the previous years was burning their hearts.

A New Baby Boy Arrived

A child was born in Shriram's family. When the child was born in September 1949 (*Ashwin Krishna Chaturthi*), Shriram had gone to Jaisinghpura, on receiving the news of communal tension there. After pacifying the people, he returned home in the evening. He was accompanied by his ascetic friend Swami Premanand. He was a member of Arya Samaj and used to sing *Bhajans* (devotional songs) in his discourses. Once in a while, he used to sing *Bhajans* in Shriram's *Yagya* – programs. The volunteers of Arya Samaj used to vilify him on account of his keeping the company of a *sanatan dharma* follower (Shriram), but he never bothered. On entering the house, when he heard the news of the birth of a baby boy, he suggested that his name should be synonymous with Lord Shiva. He said –'At present the soul of our society is consuming the poison of hatred. This child should cause us to remember the mastery over that poison.' Shriram said – 'How about naming him as Mrityunjaya? It is a synonym of Shiva.'

Thus the name was decided. When the *Namkaran Sanskar* (naming ceremony) was done, the Muslims of Katara Keshavdev, Chhatta Bazar and those living outside the Holy gate were also invited. These families had obtained protection in some or other form from Shriram in the days of communal turmoil. On behalf of the people of all religions gathered there, Dwarka Babu requested Shriram – "Please don't confine yourself to the field of religion only. You are also needed in social and political fields. So provide leadership in that area too."

The people present there also supported the suggestion of Dwarka Babu. Imam Sahib Salim said – 'If you represent the people of Mathura, then the minority community will also get peace.' When the discussion came to an end, Shriram said –'The field in which I am working is very extensive and full of heavy responsibilities. Last year we all realized that in order to control the feelings of people it is the religious base that proved to be capable. It is difficult to control such situations with political or administrative measures. These circumstances were the result of the hatred in the minds of the people; and it is the true teachings of religions that can refine the minds of the people.'

With these words, Shriram expressed that he was not at all interested in joining politics. When some friends requested again, Shriram said – 'People swimming in the ocean or river do not enjoy ponds'. After this declaration, everyone was satisfied. They said '*Dhanya! Dhanya!* (Meaning - Great! Great!) to Shriram and paid their respects to him and departed with relieved faces.

The Demand of New *Sadhaks*

Shriram himself used to read the mail. He also kept a watchful eye on the contents of the letters. After assessing the expectations of the readers of Akhand Jyoti, one day he asked Bhoodev Sharma – "Panditji! What do the readers expect from us?" Bhoodev Sharma said- "Saheb! We cannot guess much from the letters. But in two years the number of readers has increased five-fold. Some of these readers inquire about the availability of old issues. They want to read them too."

Shriram said – "We don't have old issues". After a pause, he said again –"There is only one way to fulfill their need and that is - the important articles of those magazines be published in the form of books."

Publication of Books

Any decision about 'Akhand Jyoti' used to be taken only after consulting Mataji. Her opinion was not different from Shriram's and hence the plan was made to publish books. The compilation of articles published in 'Akhand Jyoti' was published as a series of books costing six *annas*. This series also included some new books. When the price of books was being decided, Mataji said – "There may be many people who cannot afford six *annas*. We should make some arrangement for them also."

Shriram said – 'What can we do? We don't have so much resources that we distribute them free of cost." In the same context Bhoodev Sharma added his opinion – "Those who don't have money should not read books. They should first worry for food, clothes and shelter."

"The society should take care of those, who can't afford to buy even food. For this purpose there are many charitable endowments, public kitchens, granaries, etc." – said Mataji. On this Bhoodev replied – "The storehouses of books are libraries and public reading rooms. Those who cannot buy can get from there"

"Then it should be planned how to send our books to libraries." – Mataji raised another issue. Shriram was listening to this dialogue. He was contemplating silently. When he noticed that the discussion was not reaching any conclusion, he said – "Mataji wants that if the persons interested in reading these books cannot afford to pay the price, then some arrangement should be made to make the series available to them. The middle path is that we should reduce the price for such persons."

It was decided that on needy reader's request, the series should be sold for *sawa anna* (eight paisa in today's currency) instead of six *annas*. For students, it was made compulsory to get the recommendation of the Headmaster / Principal of the school so that people didn't take undue advantage of the concessional scheme. On such books, the seal of 'student edition' should also be put.

Enthusiastic Response

After reading this information in the pages of Akhand Jyoti, hundreds of readers wrote letters. Fulfilling their expectations, Shriram personally wrote to students. In those letters, he advised them to share those books with their colleagues / school mates. By October 1949 more than five hundred people had read the series of books. In the correspondence, they started requesting that they wished to visit Mathura and remain in the company of Shriramji. Some youth started calling Shriram as 'Gurudev' Shriram was very much willing to say 'yes' to the students desirous of coming to Mathura; there was no question of refusing otherwise their feelings would have been hurt. But there was no space for accommodating them.

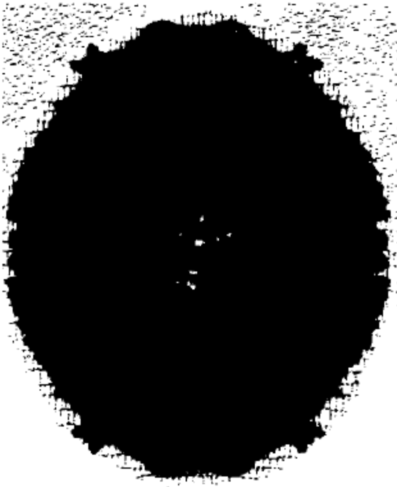
Mataji said that ten-twelve *sadhaks* could be accommodated in their home itself. But this was not a permanent solution. In future, the number of *sadhaks* was bound to increase. For separate arrangements, necessary resources were not available. Shriram's mind became restless. Several alternatives were coming in and going out of the mind. Mataji's temporary solution, that the enthusiastic students and *sadhaks* should be accommodated at home, was accepted. Bhoodev Sharma was also asked to write letters to them. But there remained a question mark on the future strategy of dealing with such demands. When no solution came to mind, Shriram shook off this internal conflict from his mind and concentrated on the flame of *Akhand Deepak* lighted in the *Puja*-room. Suddenly he felt – "His inner being is completely silent; a cool breeze is blowing." Then the scenes of Himalayas started appearing in his mental field; the memories of the last journey to the Himalayas were becoming fresh and the scenes were coming and going one by one. In that silent atmosphere, the voice of Gurudev echoed – **"Set up an Ashram, Set up an Ashram"**.

⁂

The Haveli of Aanwalkheda (Agra), where Shriram was born on September 20, 1911

A monument established in 1995 at the birth place of Shriram

Plate-1



Pandit Roop Kishore Sharma
(1866 - 1924)

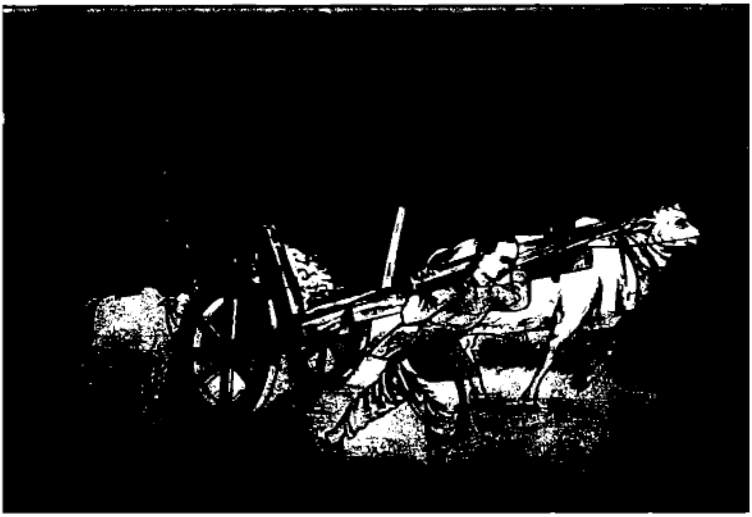
Mata Daan Kunvari Devi, Taiji
(1886 - 1972)

Pt. Shriram Sharma Acharya
(1911 - 1990)

Mata Bhagwati Devi Sharma
(1926 - 1994)

Plate-2

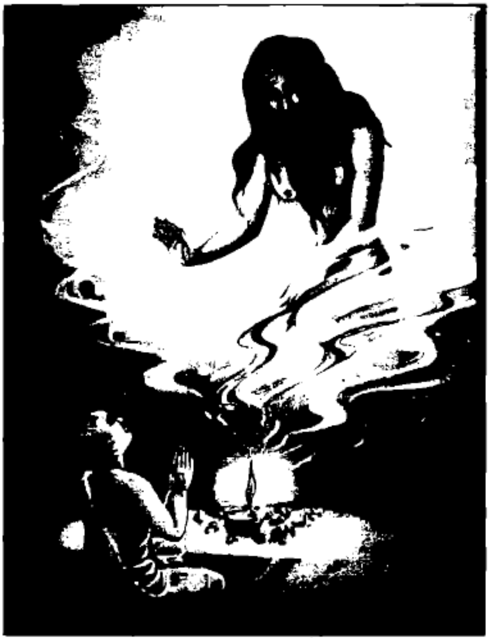
Child Shriram serving Chhapako Amma



Saved the cow from butcher; pulled the cart himself and brought the grass for her.

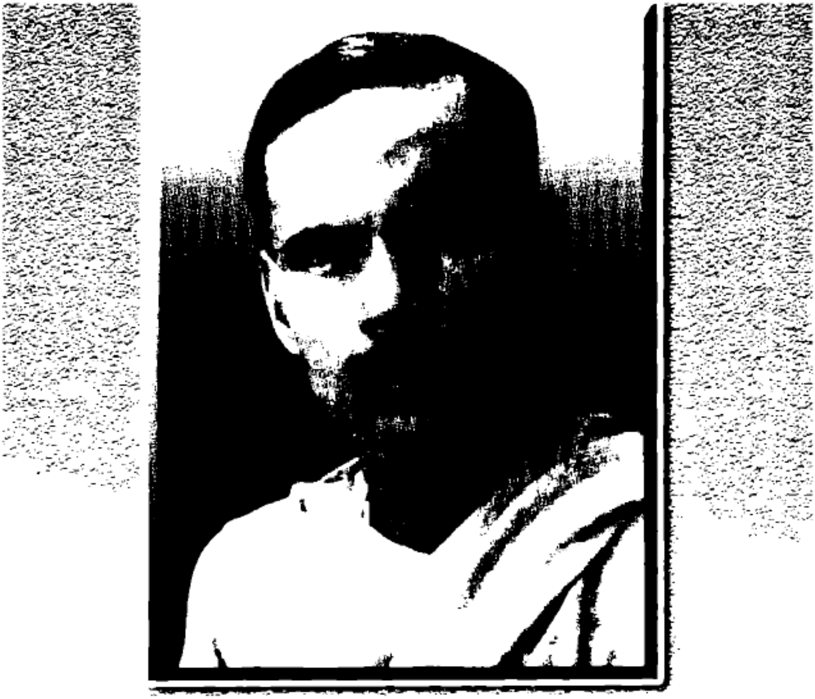
Plate-3

Shriram's Gurudev (Spiritual teacher) - Swami Sarveshvaranandji Maharaj (In his abode on inaccessible Himalayas)

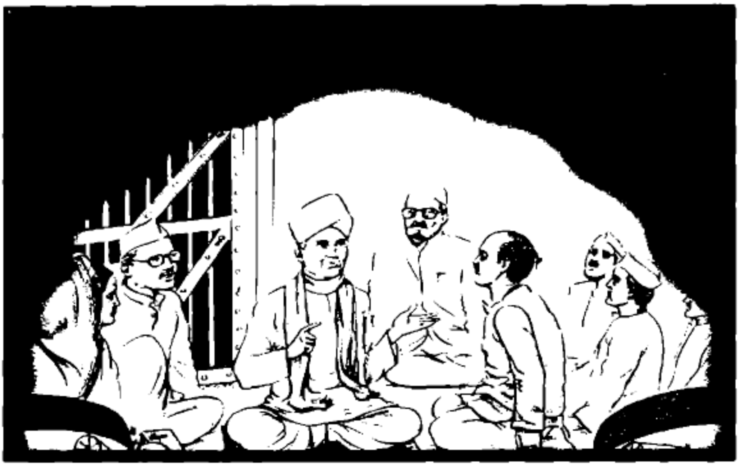


Shriram's Gurudev manifested himself in the form of a body of light in the early hours of 18th January (Vasant Panchmi day), 1926

Plate-4



Sadhak and freedom fighter Shriram

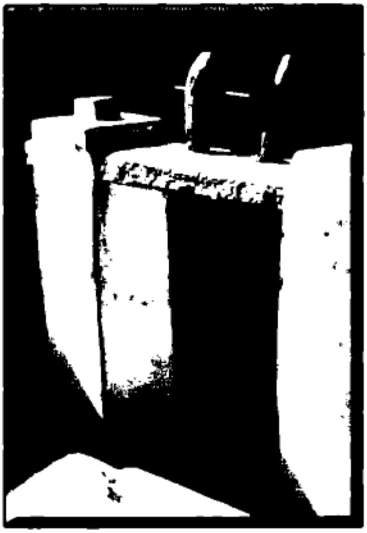


Shriram 'Matt' in Asansol jail along with Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya, Sri Rafi Ahmed Kidwai and Mata Swaroop Rani Nehru

Plate-5

Main room of the Haveli of Aanwalkheda, where Shriram used to convene meetings of his Balsena during freedom struggle

Items used by Shriram kept inside the main room before renovation



The well which Shriram himself dug in 1925; the only one in the village providing soft water.

Plate-6

Mata Saraswati Devi, first soulmate of Shriram Sharma Acharya (1915 – 1943)

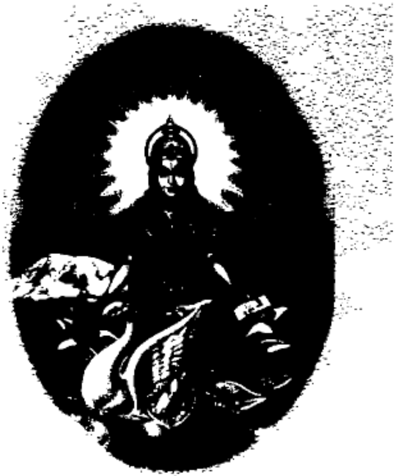
Acharyasri, surcharged with the power of Tapa, during his Mahapurashcharans of 24 lakhs

Plate-8

The first book titled 'Mein kya hoon' (Who am I?) written by Acharyasri in 1940. This Sadhana of writing inspiring books / literature continued through out his life.

Plate-9

The philosopher
Shriram

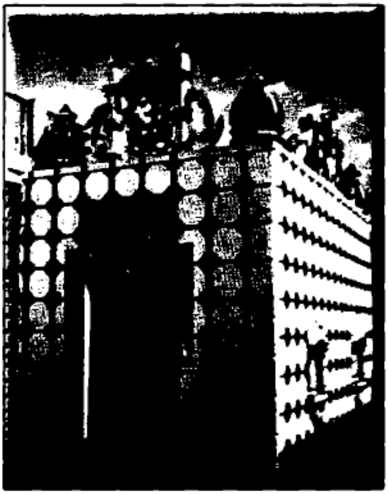


Mother Gayatri
The deity of Shriram

Youth Shriram

Plate-10

Akhand Jyoti Sansthan (as it is today)



1.The room where Shriram's 12 Mahapurashcharans of 24 lakh each were completed in the proximity of Akhand Deepak (this room has been kept as such from inside)

2.The same room has been made a Meditation Hall

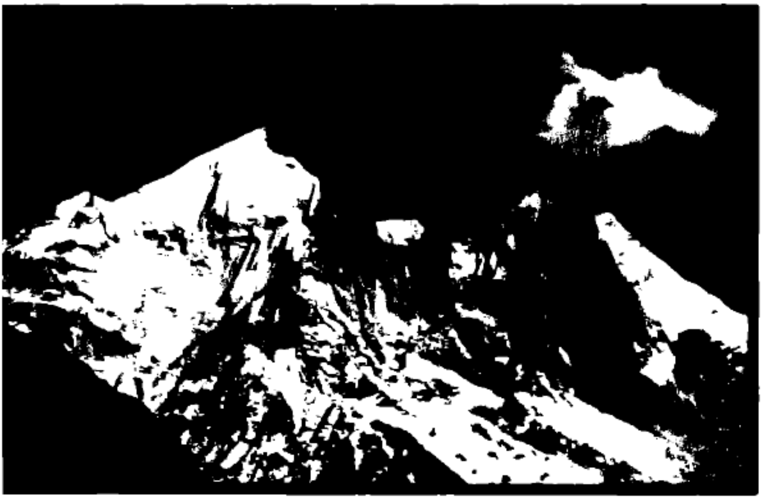
Plate-11

The cover page of the first issue of 'Akhand Jyoti' (Hindi) magazine published in January 1940

Plate-12

Simlicity personified

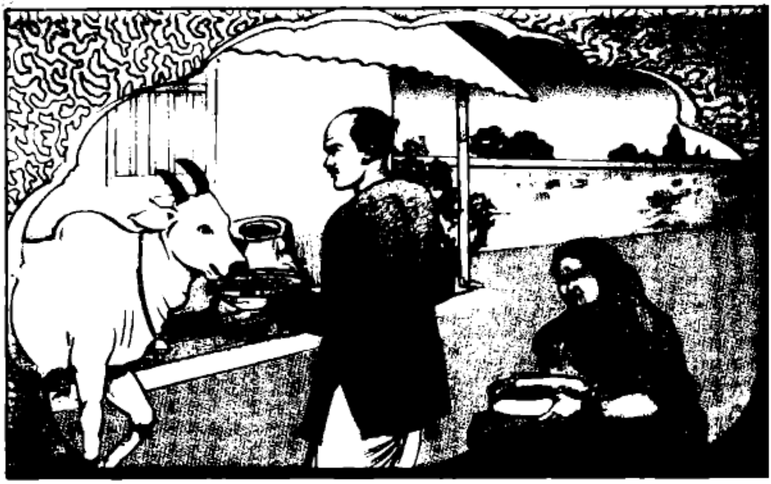
Himalayas proved to be Paras (magical stone) for him, whose touch (proximity) made him golden.



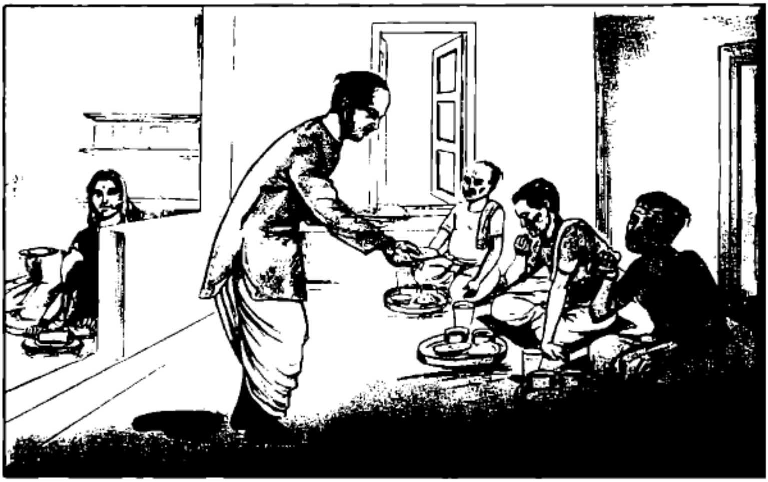
The inaccessible Himalayas, where he reached to meet his spiritual teacher

Plate-14

Our Aaradhya Satta (objects of adoration) Rishi-couple:
Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya
and Mata Bhagwati Devi



Company and participation of soulmate (Mata Bhagawti Devi) in Tapa Sadhana



Rishi-couple's tradition of hospitality knit the web of an enormous organization

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